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ABSTRACT

This book focuses on learning as a social process. The language of teaching and learning within classroom literacy lessons, and how this language contributes to building a culture of learning, is a key principle that underlies each concept presented in the book. Each of the chapters asks teachers to examine the interactive nature of classroom life and to rethink the notion of a lesson. Chapters are: (1) On-Task Literacy Learning in the Everyday Classroom; (2) On-Task Talk: Productive and Explicit Teaching; (3) Literacy Lessons Built on Interaction; (4) Assessment: Knowing and Responding to the Learner; (5) On-Task Teaching and Learning: A Framework for Focused Teaching; (6) On-Task Thinking: Reflective Teaching and Learning; and (7) Reshaping Professional Development for On-Task Teaching. The main direction of the book leads teachers to approach instructional talk in an explicit, and consequently more productive, way to reconnect the learner with the learning, and the teacher with the teaching. It asks teachers to consider the importance of classroom interactions in relation to on-task talk, on-task behavior and on-task thinking. It asks them to consider: the way they structure learning events in an interactive sense; the topics talked about in classroom lessons; how they respond to student contributions both in classroom lessons and in assessment events; how patterns or routine of classroom interaction impact on purposeful student learning; and how focused, on-task talk can promote reflective teaching and learning. (NKA)

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Foreword

He who cannot change the very fabric
of his thought will never be able to change reality.

Mohamed Anwar El-Sadat

Consider what goes on in a typical school day, week or even year. How much time is there for teaching and learning?

Now, we cannot say that all interruptions, special events, sport days and classroom games are unacceptable. We cannot say that all 'field-building talk' in the classroom is just incidental time-wasting. We cannot pour cold water on the variety of experiences that make schooling exciting, stimulating and playful for students. What we can say, though, is that learning time and learning continuity are regularly challenged in school society, and that it is essential to maximise every opportunity. There is precious little time to deliver an extensive, mandated learning agenda.

For this reason, it is essential that teachers maintain the learning purpose as a high priority, so that learning episodes are not disrupted by 'red-herring' talk and tasks. Instructional talk needs to be on task, serving the purpose of the learning experience for the students. It needs to enhance the learning agenda of the lesson in a focused and transparent way. In fact, the core benefit of quality interactions that focus on learning is that management of behaviour becomes a sideline issue in the classroom.

Just as school curricula call for students to develop as critical thinkers, this book calls for teachers to get 'in synch' with their teaching through focused professional talk, critical thinking and self-reflection. Conscious reflection on teaching practice, and on the nature of interactions in their own classrooms, connects teachers to a relevant and grounded theory of teaching efficacy. It is not about providing an elixir or magic bullet, but about providing a deeper understanding of the talk that establishes and drives lessons.

Teacher improvement is a pragmatic issue for contemporary schooling. The world, and indeed literacy, is changing rapidly, and in this educational environment teachers must develop explicit understandings and beliefs about their own practice. They can do this

only through effective professional development, where they have opportunities to enhance self-knowledge, set focused goals, devise meaningful teaching programs and augment positive classroom interactions.

Teachers express the resounding desire to be effective practitioners in order to make a visible difference to student learning. Indeed, in the current climate of educational accountabilities, teachers are *expected* to attend professional-development functions to keep abreast of methodologies and theories. In these settings, teachers are exposed to a cascade of ideas, theories and practices. Sometimes the ideas reinforce and extend teachers' thinking and practice; sometimes they complement current practices. At other times, divergent or polarised views are presented, posing unresolvable challenges and often confusing dichotomies. For practising teachers who confront decisions about literacy teaching and learning daily, the capacity to sift through the material presented becomes the critical determinant of the effectiveness and durability of 'PD'.

The foremost indicator of quality professional development is that it assists teachers to consider questions concerning their realities. It is crucial that teachers know how their current practices enable or disable the learning process. Secondly, professional development needs to shift thinking and invite focused action that invests in teachers a capacity to change. It needs to draw attention to those aspects of teaching over which teachers can exercise greater personal control, such as how they interact with students. In their endeavours to change, therefore, teachers need to be supported at the level of practice. Thirdly, what teachers learn needs to be durable, transferable and relevant — and in this they are no different from their students.

Teachers have often been compared with bower birds because of their predilection for picking up ideas that can be used immediately in classrooms — although sometimes without much concern for their relationship to, or integration with, current theories, student needs, teaching practices or programs (see Curriculum Corporation, 1996). It is now time to put focused classroom interaction and critical teacher reflection at the top of the professional-development agenda. It is time to drop the macro push — the collection of good ideas — and shift the focus to the micro level of practice, the level of talk. The foremost intention of this book is that teachers will develop a deeper understanding of the reality of their classrooms by focusing on interactions.

For teachers, talk is a key tool in the teaching and learning process. We have to get it right — what we say, how we say it, how our students hear and understand it, and how we respond. To improve the quality of our practice, therefore, we must advance our thinking beyond simply renovating our repertoire of strategies to addressing the level of talk by focusing on understanding its role in quality classroom practice.

For example, the Quality Teaching Program Project 1.8: Literacy Learning and Teaching in the Classroom (Wagga Wagga Diocese) directly relates interactive practices to the

effectiveness of teaching and learning. To support assessment and evaluation, the teachers in this project videotape their teaching at three strategic points throughout the year. With guided support, they analyse their interactive practice with a view to refining and reshaping instructional talk. This approach enables focused teacher self-reflection in order to monitor and evaluate growth and change.

Programs like these recognise that one-off professional-development episodes cannot support teachers to address long-term teaching change at the micro level. Ongoing professional-learning programs are needed, tailored to assist and support focused interactive change over time. This concept needs to forge the path for future directions in professional development.

Reference

Curriculum Corporation (1996) *Literacy: Why Do We Do the Things We Do?* Curriculum Corporation, Melbourne.

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Thanks to all the wonderful children at St Peter's Primary School; you guys are so much fun to work with. I love teaching you and learning with you. Enjoy a lifetime of learning!

My thanks to all the dedicated teachers with whom I have had the pleasure to work, especially Mandy, Carey, Linda and Rhonda, who give so tirelessly day after day to learn about teaching, with teachers and from teachers.

As a global acknowledgement, the photographs of teachers interacting, and Transcripts 4.3 and 5.3, are taken within the context of sessions and lessons from the Quality Teaching Program Project 1.8 (Wagga Wagga Diocese, 2001–2003). All other transcripts and the teacher comments found in the book are taken from the corpus of transcript and interview data collected for my research work (Edwards-Groves, 1993, 1998).

Thanks to Barry Gordon, PETA's editor. You made this endeavour an easy yet rewarding experience, believe it or not!

Setting the scene

This book focuses on learning as a social process. The language of teaching and learning within classroom literacy lessons — and how this language contributes to building a culture of learning — is a key principle that underlies each concept presented. Each chapter asks teachers to examine the interactive nature of classroom life and to rethink the notion of a 'lesson'.

The main direction of the book leads teachers to approach instructional talk in an explicit, and consequently more productive, way in order to reconnect the learner with the learning, and the teacher with the teaching. Teachers are asked to consider the importance of classroom interactions in relation to on-task talk, on-task behaviour and on-task thinking. In particular, teachers are asked to consider:

- the way they structure learning events in an interactive sense
- the topics talked about in classroom lessons
- how they respond to student contributions both in classroom lessons and in assessment events
- how patterns or routines of classroom interaction impact on purposeful student learning
- how focused, on-task talk can promote reflective teaching and learning.

Using research to learn about effective teaching

The key points of each following chapter blend what classroom literacy practice looks like with what theorists and teachers say, using transcripts and classroom examples as explanatory tools. The book takes the main points of my own research study (1998) to draw attention to productive and focused instructional talk.

By foregrounding the significance of classroom interactions, this research aims to shift our current understandings of what constitutes effective literacy teaching in

today's classrooms. The lessons learned by the research participants, who have closely examined classroom interaction and professional change, have valuable implications for all teachers.

The research involved a program of professional development called *collaborative focused reflection*. This program aimed to guide and support teacher learning and change through focused reflection and critical self-analysis of instructional talk. This focus on classroom interactive practices critically extended traditional professional-development approaches by locating the change agenda firmly at the level of classroom talk. The approach encompassed in-class support, focused reflection and lesson evaluation to assist teachers to interpret classroom experience. By examining the effects of classroom interaction on students, teachers were motivated to extend and improve its quality in the full consciousness of what they were doing, and why.*

* *Aspects of the collaborative analytic approach are now shaping contemporary professional development. For example, the Catholic Schools Office, Wagga Wagga Diocese (2000-2003) has implemented a professional-learning project that enables teachers to focus on the importance of classroom interaction through videotaping teaching at strategic points and supporting guided analysis of teachers' interactive practice.*

In my study the teachers read transcripts of their own literacy lessons. This enabled them to focus on the significant relationship between effective pedagogy, classroom interaction and explicit teaching. The initial findings demonstrated that most lessons were only implicitly, and often loosely, related to a set of learning objectives. Students thus found it difficult to know what was required of them cognitively. The research showed that systematic, responsive and explicit interactions — major components of effective teaching — were largely absent from teachers' practice, or were inconsistent with the teachers' beliefs about effective practice. This revelation acted as a springboard for interactive change.

These teacher-researchers shifted their understandings about the role of classroom interaction. They began a move that would align teaching with learning through focused instructional talk. In essence, they reconceptualised the notion of what counts as a 'lesson' by viewing it as an interactive event. Understanding the importance of explicit teaching, and what it looks and sounds like in the classroom literacy lesson, became an essential dimension of effective practice recognised by these teachers — and their new understandings about the role of talk in classroom literacy learning reflected findings from other research (e.g. Freebody, Ludwig & Gunn, 1995).

As a result of this learning, the teachers set up their own systems for improvement. With collaborative professional guidance, they developed five categories for focused interactive change.

1. **Topics of talk:** what is introduced as the topic for talk — that is, the 'head topic' the teacher orients to throughout the course of the lesson
2. **Explicit introduction, instruction and review:** the way lessons in literacy are structured interactively; how they are introduced, set up and concluded
3. **Systematic presentation of four literacy resources:** the teaching of particular aspects of literacy that the teacher orients to within a lesson
4. **Sequential progression of lessons:** the organisational features of each lesson in literacy, and the interrelatedness of lesson phases
5. **Management and pedagogy:** the interspersement of talk directed to literacy instruction with talk directed to behaviour management

The teachers drew these focal points together within the framework for focused teaching and learning that is presented in detail in Chapter 5. They saw that the effectiveness of classroom teaching and learning hinged on the effectiveness of interactive practices. They valued, and could account for, the changes that they made to their own practice. And their comments provide compelling accounts of the importance of focused and explicit instructional talk in each of the categories that they identified. Each main section of this book is headed with excerpts from the comments made by the classroom teachers involved in my study.

Chapter overview

Aspects of my research are taken up in each chapter to elaborate the book's central focus — productive and focused classroom talk. The book draws in discussions about classroom diversity, the elements of a literacy lesson, interactive teaching, reflective teaching and learning, and the role of talk in professional development.

Chapter 1 focuses on classroom diversity. It introduces explicit teaching as an overarching premise of teaching that effectively addresses student diversity. It also argues that diversity can be addressed by connecting literacy learning to meaningful inquiries across the curriculum.

Chapter 2 explores the fundamental principles of explicit teaching. Through lesson transcripts, it looks at explicit instructional talk that reveals these principles. Each main principle is further clarified in the ensuing chapters.

Chapter 3 presents the social dimension of the classroom literacy lesson. It represents lessons as evolving interactive events by considering what is accomplished by the talk of

the classroom. This chapter alerts teachers to the many features of lesson talk and their contribution to productive, on-task teaching and learning.

Chapter 4 unpacks the role of talk in meaningful classroom assessment so that teachers can respond authentically to learner needs in their instructional talk and in program design. It also takes up the critical importance of reviewing assessment with students.

Chapter 5 presents a framework for instruction that aims to assist teachers and students to engage authentically in 'on-task talk' and 'on-task behaviour'. This chapter presents teachers with an essential teaching structure for organising teaching and sustaining learning within the context of classroom lessons.

Chapter 6 highlights the critical value of embedding reflective practices within each lesson. It shows that purposeful reflection unlocks hidden learnings to allow students to review, reflect on and articulate learning. This chapter focuses on the development of visible metacognitive practices to assist the learner, and presents a selection of practical strategies to promote purposeful reflection and review. It also sheds light on the important role of focused teacher reflection.

Chapter 7 centres on professional change. It calls for teachers to become involved in shaping the directions of professional change at the fundamental level of practice — the level of talk — in the best interests of their students. It draws out the important implications for self-monitoring, evaluation and refinement of teacher talk.

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On-task literacy learning in the everyday classroom

... until I looked at transcripts of my own lessons, I thought I conducted focused teaching. It came as a surprise to me that I wasn't doing it. Explicit teaching hit me as a powerful way of creating an inclusive educational environment that puts kids at the centre of the learning. We expect that children are to be partners in developing self-discipline — for example, we sit them down and fully discuss expectations, we allow them in on that — but I believe we haven't taken it that step further towards fully allowing them in on their own learning, and we need to do that.

Year 4 teacher

Students are at the centre of our work. As teachers, we commit ourselves to providing a social and educational experience that enables our students to participate purposefully and actively in their future. We take our place in developing a society that is literate, creative, thinking, resourceful, tolerant and progressive in its learning endeavours.

We can work towards these ideals by building a culture of learning that provides authentic, motivating, relevant and meaningful experiences that are characterised by productive and focused interactions. As the teacher observes above, creating an inclusive educational environment through explicit teaching is a powerful way to put students at the centre of the learning. It paves the way for co-operative classrooms where students act as partners with the teacher and with one another as they work towards a shared purpose.

As definitions of literacy evolve, so too do approaches towards teaching literacy. More and more, theorists and educationists are viewing classroom practice through the lens of ethnography; that is, they are viewing teaching and learning as an interactive, situated, social practice. This perspective compels teachers to consider the interactions that occur in classrooms on a day-to-day basis, and how they impact on literacy learning.

Literacy success for all students

> **... explicit teaching opens the doors for more of our children ... it accounts for difference ... making the literacy curriculum more accessible.**
>
> ***Year 2/3 teacher***

The concept of *explicit teaching* is now regularly associated with effective literacy pedagogy for diverse student groups in contemporary classrooms. Why? For a start, *im*plicit approaches are simply not appropriate in today's educational environment. There is a large body of research that documents the ways in which conventional literacy pedagogy serves to empower particular socio-cultural or ability groups while disempowering others (see chapter references). In fact, it has been suggested that basic literacy instruction in the everyday classroom *wields little power* (Walton, 1992) unless the language of the classroom intentionally accounts for the diverse nature of literacy learners. Implicit instruction might appear to be inclusive and 'wholesome' on the surface because the students may seem to be engaged. Implicit pedagogies, however, assume that there is a set of shared experiences and backgrounds among the learners. Such assumptions no longer reflect reality, if they ever did. For example, it is critical to consider how students from different social and cultural backgrounds may be excluded or even silenced because they lack assumed cultural knowledge, or cannot cope with the question-and-answer situation, or have difficulty with multi-modal texts because their preference and experience is from an oral tradition (Anstey & Bull, 2002).

Implicit teaching tends to mask differences — differences in circumstances, in gender, in ethnicity and so on — while playing down differences between oral and written language. It ignores the fact that even within our own literate culture there are real differences in the uses of literacy by different sectors of the community. It excludes knowledge and linguistic information that is highly valued within particular cultural and societal structures. All of this means that some students are penalised simply because of who they are.

Typical student groups also encompass a whole range of language abilities, including students with learning difficulties. Educators in the field of special education have long called for the explicit instruction of literacy skills for all students, but especially for those demonstrating difficulties in literacy learning. While students with specific learning difficulties or with language backgrounds other than English have traditionally been treated to more explicit teaching, this has often occurred in a withdrawal setting.

Implicit approaches often leave students to 'guess' or 'catch on to' the focus of the lesson, and to make their own connections from loosely related teacher–student exchanges. It is often a demanding cognitive task to assemble and make sense of the pieces of information that are embedded within a whole range of 'school-type' talk. Lessons featuring implicit talk often result in the loss of cohesive learning as topics and responses become tangled over time. We cannot afford to leave learning to chance in this way.

For some students, language and literacy learning does not come easily. They may have difficulty in integrating what they have learnt or heard in the classroom. Such learners often find it hard to pull information together to make associations or connections, to draw conclusions, or to use what they know as a basis on which to build subsequent learning. Often they do not know what they know or can do; they need more structured assistance.

Effective teaching assists students to make the appropriate connections. Through focused talk, the relevance of learning to students' life experiences is drawn out explicitly. Simultaneously, effective teachers establish a secure learning environment and a purpose for the learning. Effective teachers recognise that all learners need to:

- be valued for their contributions
- be treated as individuals
- be presented with relevant learning opportunities, and problems to solve
- have new learning embedded in prior learning experiences
- have multiple opportunities for practice and refinement of new knowledge and skills at their level
- interact with others to clarify their thoughts and try out ideas
- review learning
- reflect on learning.

So, the productivity of instructional talk is clearly a significant feature of student learning. It is by connecting all students to learning through meaningful and focused talk that teachers can lessen the 'gap' between students. The empowerment of *all* students through successful learning experiences results from instruction that is explicit yet responsive.

> **... classrooms are made up of a range of kids with different needs; they're from different backgrounds and with different experiences and abilities. We need to think about that and be fair to all of them — that's our job. Some children can survive with implicit teaching; regardless of what you say or do, they are astute and are able to make sense out of what all of this means, and internalise it cohesively. But children with difficulties or those from different backgrounds may miss out on learning about literacy if everything is incidentally taught. It is true that if we announce what we are really talking about as the focus of learning in the lesson, then these children have more of a chance of catching on and focusing on what is really going on. At least with explicit teaching we've given them a greater chance for real learning ...**
>
> ***Year 2/3/4 teacher***

Until fairly recent times, the concept of explicit teaching was usually taken to mean a narrow, lock-step, skills-based instruction. But explicit instruction does not entail a regression to traditional teacher-driven or teacher-centred methodologies. Rather, explicit teaching is a key aspect of social constructivism; it is an interactive practice that directly influences literacy learning across the curriculum. It enables a shift to more *learning*-centred literacy pedagogy that, in fact, works towards building a culture of learning in the classroom — a concept developed further in the next chapter.

> **[It] has wider implications than just making our teaching more focused; it encompasses this whole idea of shared teaching and learning, and the children's self-reflection and evaluation in relation to outcomes [of the lesson] against the stated aims. It is about thinking clearly about what we say to kids, the particular learning task we are focusing on and the actual structure of our lessons — what we are teaching and how it is presented. It also includes explicitly demonstrating and modelling specific procedures or structures, skills, knowledge and, importantly, attitudes to learning ...**
>
> ***Year 2/3 teacher***

Explicit teaching establishes conversations that are productive, inclusive and learning-centred. It directly and intentionally prepares students for their literacy learning and informs them of the learning path. It enables them to develop strategies for learning and for articulating the learning that has taken place. It helps them to remain on task

and to focus their thinking on learning within the maze of stimulus surrounding them every day in and out of the classroom.

Figure 1.1: Differences between implicit and explicit teaching

Implicit teaching:	Explicit teaching:
o leaves power with the teacher, who keeps control over a hidden agenda	o shares power with students, who are informed and consulted about the purpose of learning tasks
o is exclusive, locking out learners who cannot guess the teacher's agenda	o is inclusive, inviting learners to take control over their own learning
o favours students whose background and experiences are consonant with the teacher's and/or with conventional schooling practices	o supports students whose background and experiences put them at risk of being marginalised by conventional schooling practices
o favours strategies ('bags of tricks') over an overall approach to learning	o creates a pervasive learning culture rather than a set of experiences that are incidentally related
o works by assumption	o works by clarification and shared understanding
o has little impact on learning.	o has significant impact on learning.

Scaffolding learners through focused instructional talk

Classroom teachers have long recognised the importance of supporting students with diverse needs. They have provided interactive instructional support through cueing, prompting, modelling, questioning, elaborating, paraphrasing, offering explanations, inviting participation and contributions, clarifying understandings, grouping and reteaching. This support is woven through the fabric of any lesson, and it is adjusted to meet the literacy needs of individuals as they work towards independence.

This kind of support, often called scaffolding, is not a strategy so much as a principled interactive *approach* that underpins effective and productive teaching. Scaffolding is a term used to describe the assistance necessary to enable learners to accomplish tasks and develop understanding that they would not quite be able to manage on their own (Hammond & Gibbons, 2001). It is a quality of effective pedagogy that is appropriate for supporting and challenging all learners.

Scaffolding reflects the understanding that learners construct knowledge, rather than have knowledge passed to them by the teacher. The teacher's role is to customise support within learning events, helping the learner to construct meaning and extend knowledge in text interpretation and construction. The approach recognises that all students are working at different points along the learning continuum. To be effective, therefore, the teacher must know and respond to students through focused instructional talk and appropriately selected texts, tasks and classroom structures (e.g. flexibly organised groups that meet particular learning needs).

To be productive, scaffolding goes beyond instructional *conversation* — for example, free-ranging, roving talk. Rather, it is focused and explicit instructional talk. Effective scaffolding works to build a *culture of learning* within the context of any lesson: it keeps the learning goal in focus; the student's attention is directly on the task at hand; and the student recognises the relevance of the task, which supports her/his motivation.

Connecting all students to literacy across the curriculum

Links to literacy: these students are classifying and recording data about the sources and impacts of pollution (society and environment content) that will form the knowledge basis of a report-writing task in English.

Literacy is fundamental to curriculum practice. It is involved in all teaching and learning activities in every learning area. Each learning area places its own literacy demands on learners in complex and interrelated ways, and each makes unique contributions to the development of an individual's literacy capacity. Approaching literacy education in an explicit way across the curriculum opens the door to a more learning-centred, inclusive pedagogy — a particularly important concern in the current educational climate where teachers are burdened with 'curriculum overload' and students are confronted with an ever-increasing multiplicity of texts and information.

To meet the literacy needs of all students, teachers need to make explicit connections about literacy between the curriculum areas, because students may not be able to make them for themselves. Therefore, curriculum planning must take into account that literacy is both an *instrument for* all teaching and learning and an *object of* explicit teaching and learning. There must be room in each curriculum area to embrace the literacy practices that are key aspects of school success. These practices are gates that often bar the progress of students who do not share the interpretive frames or the comprehension strategies that are assumed in particular learning areas (Gee, 1996).

Because literacy and language demands differ significantly across the curriculum, many students find it difficult to achieve success unless teachers integrate literacy strategies with units of work from learning areas other than English. Language and literacy learning cannot be conceived independently of the content about which students talk, read, view and write (Hammond, 2001). Explicit teaching makes transparent the literacy knowledge and skills required to complete any task in any learning area, utilising the literacy links between learning areas while maintaining the integrity of each. For example, before students in a Year 7 geography class are asked to undertake a class research project, the teacher needs firstly to analyse the task to:

- identify the literacy capabilities needed by students to engage with the task
- open up the language of the task — the instructional words, the content-specific words, the language forms that are appropriate to the purpose, and the language forms that realise appropriate tenor for the audience
- decide if all the students have the control necessary to complete the task independently
- identify those literacy demands which require further teaching support.

This process is outlined in Figure 1.2.

Figure 1.2: Analysing the literacy demands of tasks, texts or units of work

Can students:

- understand everything the task asks them to do?
- read the texts required to complete the task?
- identify the main ideas in a paragraph?
- move through increasingly complex texts?
- make notes from a section of text (e.g. a chapter or submenu)?
- write answers to questions in complete sentences?
- summarise a passage from a text?
- locate appropriate information from a range of sources, including the Internet?
- use technology as a tool for learning?
- create diagrams, tables and maps to represent information?
- interpret diagrams, tables and maps to extrapolate information?
- select the appropriate type of text to present information?
- construct an effective paragraph by making a point and elaborating on it?
- sequence ideas into a logical order?
- see how a text is constructed and use a similar pattern themselves?
- implement the research process and present information in a range of ways?
- use correct spelling and punctuation?
- prepare and give presentations to the class on a particular topic?

Adapted from CEC NSW, 2000.

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2

On-task talk: Productive and explicit teaching

... explicit teaching is a big step towards students controlling their learning by letting them in on the big secret. Everybody is thinking and talking about the same thing — the main learning task.

Year 4 teacher

Teaching and learning events are socially constructed — built in and through the patterns of language interaction that take place in the classroom, and through the stimuli and tasks with which students engage. Talk is a tool that shapes classroom thinking. It is the major resource that teachers draw upon to shape any episode into a learning experience. It is the main mechanism by which the curriculum is delivered and negotiated.

Talk, then, should have high status in the classroom. But is it intrinsically worthwhile? A common dilemma for teachers emerges in the following interview extract.

My class discussions often lead me into areas far removed from the original topic or purpose of the lesson. I am left to ask myself: Will I pursue the new direction? Will I save it for another day? How far is far enough? How can I keep discussions from going too far afield? How can I not dismiss their interest and enthusiasm, yet remain true to my lesson purposes? Is the talk seemingly building appropriate field

knowledge or acting as a distraction from the main learning task for my students? Whilst the discussion seems to have generated an interesting and motivating opportunity for talk for my students, I sometimes have been carried away from what we were intending to do in the lesson. I want my students to be able to express opinions and follow their interests, and sometimes I think it helps them better understand the topic, but I know I must meet their learning needs. Following the lead of my students often leads to an unexpected but worthwhile approach to the topic, but I also have a lesson to teach!

This tension confronts and challenges effective teaching and learning. Teachers are compelled to consider whether, and how well, they monitor classroom talk as lessons progress towards achieving literacy outcomes. Do they actually make considered *on the run* judgements about how the direction of the talk relates to achieving lesson outcomes? Do they consider how to deflect or control irrelevant talk that may distract learners? This issue calls for careful teacher judgement and an understanding of the role of classroom talk in purposeful teaching and learning.

In any particular lesson, the teacher is likely to carry an idea about the intention of the lesson, and therefore about what counts as the learning. But this idea may not be shared by the students. For them, what counts as the main topic in a lesson may be any number of things. It is therefore the responsibility of the teaching to make specific learning intentions clear for all students, and to maintain the instructional focus. These aspects of teaching draw attention to the importance of classroom interaction.

The previous chapter introduced explicit teaching as an approach that generates purposeful teaching and learning. It began to unpack the notion of explicit teaching by contrasting it with *im*plicit teaching. But to understand explicit teaching more fully, it is necessary to look at how teachers and learners interact in the classroom.

Learning cannot be viewed independently of the context in which it takes place. By analysing the talk within classroom literacy lessons, we are better able to construct a picture of exactly what explicit teaching is (and is not). It is important to note that we can also learn much about explicit teaching by *absences* in the lesson talk. Such an approach reveals what is made plain to the students about the learning, and what occurs incidentally or is left implicit. The analysis in this book will focus on three instructional points throughout the lesson — sometimes referred to as *lesson phases* (Anstey & Bull, 2003):

- getting started — introductory points
- lesson purpose and topic maintenance — medial points

- wrapping it up and reviewing — concluding points.

As well as exploring interactions at these points, this book will consider the following crucial questions that focus directly on classroom talk, so that an image of explicit teaching emerges.

- How is the lesson structured and organised through talk?
- What is actually being talked about: what are the focal topics of talk?

Getting started: Introductory points

Lesson beginnings are the foundation stones upon which learning is built. Here, the learning is placed centre stage, powerfully influencing the progression of the events that will follow.

Let's examine how some lessons begin, to get an idea of the topics that teachers set up as the main points upon which students should focus their thinking and activity.

> **... in introducing the main focus of the lesson and how it links to previous learning, children will know what they will learn and what they need to learn. I found in my lessons that if you are more explicit in the introduction of lessons in terms of the focus of the learning, then it will follow that the objective of the learning will be presented more systematically. It also ties in so well with assessment in determining what are student needs from the beginning of the lesson and what skills they need to learn or revise.**
>
> ***Year 4 teacher***

Past studies of the talk at the beginning of lessons (see Edwards-Groves, 1998) show that specific orientations to aspects of literacy learning are often made only implicitly, or not at all. The talk is typically imperative — instructing students to complete tasks, and involving a high degree of management (a finding also reported in Anstey & Bull, 2002).

Consider the following lesson introductions. Try to think from the students' point of view: do students have access to the lesson intention — what's inside the teacher's head? Also ask yourself:

- Who gets to speak: who generates, regulates and leads the talk?
- What do the students hear to be the topic for learning?

- Is the primary focus: a literacy topic? a management topic? an organisational topic? a thematic topic?

Transcript 2.1

Classroom context: Year 4/5/6 – writing a news report

T: Today we are continuing on with our work on news reports; we are actually going to be learning how to write some. We've learnt there's lots of different types of news reports — can be in the paper, can be on the radio, can be in a magazine, could be on TV — and they're all written the same way. Did you know that — Jemima? They're all written following a certain pattern; today we are going to look at some newspaper reports to find out about that pattern ...	Students clearly hear that the lesson is about learning to write 'newspaper reports'. The literacy topic is clearly presented as the focus for thinking and learning.

By comparison, the next example records a literacy lesson that is introduced via thematic talk. Here, the theme of the week takes priority, focusing on students' experiences or prior knowledge around a particular theme. It is fairly typical of task introductions that centre on explorations of particular shared concepts or cultural experiences that relate to a selected theme of study, for instance the theme of 'the zoo', 'television' or 'insects'. No literacy topic is presented for consideration. The theme is taken up as the primary focus and, in the subsequent exchanges, students recount their own trips to the zoo, making no links with the class text.

Transcript 2.2

Classroom context: Year 4 – oral comprehension of class text

T: Okay, today for reading, we're doing some activities about zoo animals. Who has been to the zoo, Year 4?	Students clearly hear that the lesson is about doing 'zoo animals'. The topic of 'zoo' is presented as the focus for thinking and learning.

The next transcript also shows the teacher establishing the lesson focus around a topic — in this case, 'praying mantis'. Again, there is no orientation to specific literacy learning, or even to the teacher's intention, which is to write a scientific report.

Transcript 2.3

Classroom context: Year 2/3/4 – writing a scientific report using a shared text reading as a preliminary task

T: How could we give those praying mantis a drink? Kyle, what do you think? **Kyle:** We could get a container, dig a hole in the dirt and stick that in. **T:** Right. **Kyle:** And fill up with water. **T:** Right — and that wouldn't be a bad idea, actually, would it? But of course the trouble is, what might happen when people putting insects into the container ...	From the outset of this reading lesson, the major topic of talk is about insects. At times there are topical shifts in the discussion to include terrariums, the water cycle and evaporation. At no point in the 45-minute opening segment of talk is the purpose of the lesson (writing scientific reports) introduced.

As we will see in the next introduction, it is not only topics that can supplant the learning intention as the lesson focus. Simply *getting the activity done* can easily become the main concern, and the sequence of the lesson may be dictated by a worksheet (a finding also reported in Anstey & Bull, 2002). This is evident when the teacher requests that the sheet be completed quickly so that the next lesson, a game, can begin. There is no clear statement that orientates students' thinking towards a specific focus of learning.

Transcript 2.4

Classroom context: Year2/3 – comprehension

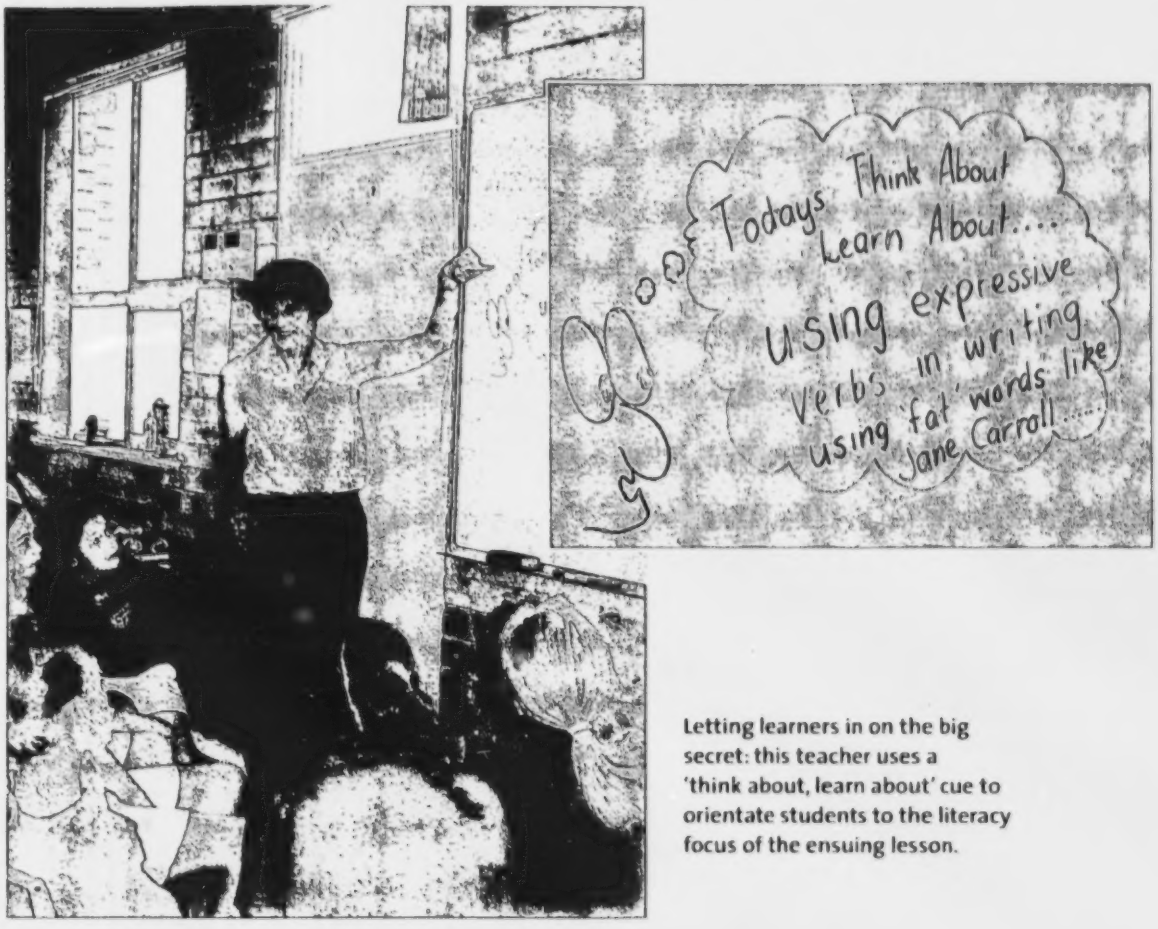
T: Today we are doing a cloze activity sheet. Now you all know how to do those; we've done them before. You've got about twenty minutes to get that done and we'll go onto some spelling. I've got a great new game for you to play. Now it's a good idea to read it through to get a bit of an idea what it's about ... **S:** We've done this before, with Mrs, Miss J ... **T:** We, we're doing it again, um, just for practice — come on, get started. **S:** That's not fair. **T:** Just do it again or we won't get to play our game, or maybe you'll like some extra homework ... **Ss:** Oh ... [*Students moaning*]	The *activity* — doing the cloze sheet — was the point of this lesson. The completion of the sheet and the production of work (not literacy learning) was the focus of the lesson. At this point the talk indicates that the learners' needs are not being met.

In the next lesson, *doing spelling* is introduced as the topic for instruction but is not developed. This is a phenomenon that has been described as "content talk for school" (Freiberg & Freebody, 1995). It *appears* to lead up to instructional talk, but is in fact not resolved in any way, and managerial and organisational talk become dominant.

Transcript 2.5

Classroom context: Year 4 – spelling groups

T: Girls, what is your problem? There is three of you here and your books are shut. You know how we do spelling: we take a new page at the beginning of the week, we divide it into four — what are the four marks we mark? Darren Harrison? [*No response*] Dana? **Dana:** Um, four and half, nine, thirteen and a half. **T:** Four and a half, nine, thirteen and a half, top and bottom line and the right-hand top of the page; over the top line, the day and date, and when I give you the theme for this week's words, you will write that on the left-hand side — and then you listen, carefully.	The literacy focus is managed here within a particular routine. The teacher comment "you know how we do spelling" orientates the students to the procedure of ruling the page and copying the words down.



Letting learners in on the big secret: this teacher uses a 'think about, learn about' cue to orientate students to the literacy focus of the ensuing lesson.

Effective teachers prepare the learning path by explaining the instructional *goals* of the lesson and the *reason* for the lesson, paying careful attention to what is talked about. The transcripts above, and elsewhere throughout this book, demonstrate the importance of clearly orientating students to specific learning outcomes.

Of course, thematic talk *is* appropriate at times to achieve the lesson purposes. It is vital for teachers to invite students to connect with texts — to bring their prior knowledge and experiences to texts, and to curriculum content, in order to make sense of their world. However, teachers need to be mindful that if themes and texts are 'announced' as the only topic for talk, without links to the rationale for using them, then the intended learning purposes are obscured. Literacy learning needs to maintain a high profile in literacy lessons. This is not to devalue the important place of using texts for enjoyment. It is simply a recognition that students should not be left to second-guess what is expected of them at school.

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Lesson purpose and topic maintenance: Medial points

These points link backwards and forwards: they keep the lesson focus on the literacy purpose and rationale that has been established in the introduction, and they point to the outcomes that will be realised.

It is critical to make explicit links between lesson introductions, lesson purposes, instructional sequences and lesson conclusions. By maintaining the literacy focus throughout the lesson, teachers maximise students' encounters with the objective of the lesson and ensure that the lesson counts as a valuable literacy-learning experience.

Many lessons, however, show talk to be fragmented, regularly shifting from literacy to 'everyday' familiar themes in an incidental or even ad hoc fashion. Digressions emerge as a regular and almost routine occurrence. As a result, students are asked to navigate through an interactive maze. There is a high probability that they will take wrong turns and pursue dead ends. Since they never see the route ahead, a complete picture cannot emerge. In these circumstances, students have to decide for themselves what is central and what is peripheral, what is valuable and what is not. By asking students implicitly to unravel information and piece together the meaningful messages, teachers require their students to do more than learn literacy or learn about literacy; they require students to problem-solve their way through the lesson — to guess what the teacher is thinking.

This Kindergarten teacher has explicitly introduced the lesson focus on verbs as action words. The shared reading maintains this focus. Here the action 'ski' is foregrounded.

The following example illustrates how the main topic of talk often changes quickly and unpredictably — almost haphazardly. Here, talk about text shifts to the subject of fireworks, and then the teacher and students take up the topic of games set against the apparent 'literacy-learning' background. The transition from one topic to another is quickly identified by these students as if it is a routine practice. Students quickly engage and comply with the practice, but do they learn anything new about literacy?

Transcript 2.6

Classroom context: Year 4 – poetry-writing using 'feeling' words

(The teacher begins the lesson by reading the text *My Hiroshima*. The child narrator has just described summer nights watching fireworks.)

T: Have you been to see any fireworks?	At this point the topic of 'fireworks' is taken up to be the main focus of the talk — a digression from the text reading. Ostensibly, the aim here is to support text comprehension and student inclusion. Note, though, that activities and talk related to the main intention of the lesson — 'to write poetry using feeling words' — is not heard in the talk.
S: [*Together*] Yep/Yes/No.	
T: Where did you go? [*Points to a student*]	
Hannah: Um, me?	
T: I'm taking people with their hands up. Yes?	
S: We went to, ah ... the showground ...	
T: Excuse me, Kris, we keep the conversation within the whole group; we don't have conversations with the person next to us.	
S: ... and there were fireworks at the park there.	
T: Mm. Do you ever watch the fireworks on TV — say the new year's eve fireworks, and the ones around the cities?	
S: [*Together*] Yes/No.	
T: All the beautiful colours. What do you like about fireworks? Hands up — don't call out. Yes, um, Jane.	
Jane: All the colours.	
T: Right, yes. Maria? [*Background chatter*] Will you people stop, listen?	
Maria: They're pretty.	

T: Yes, what else? Hands up. [*Points to another student*]

S: Rainbows.

T: They do look like rainbows sometimes, mm. Do you know how to play 'oranges and lemons'?

S: [*Together*] Yep/No.

T: You do, do you? Right, we might have a game of that, um, maybe tomorrow, if we can squeeze it in.

S: Oh ...

S: Can we do it now?

T: If we have time today but I really doubt it; if not, then tomorrow. I remember I used to play 'oranges and lemons' when I went to school. It was one of my favourite games.

S: I don't remember how to play it.

T: That's all right; you and I'll remember it tomorrow. What are some of the games that you like to play at school? Yes Jane?

Jane: I like playing netball.

T: Right, anyone else? Yes?

S: Cricket.

T: Okay, can you think of any other games that are played at school? Yes Joanna?

Joanna: Hopscotch and, um ...

S: I like playing hopscotch too ...

T: Hands up if you like hopscotch. [*Some students raise hands*] What about cricket? Or marbles — do many of the boys like marbs?

Emon: I have got marbles at home.

T: [*Resuming the text reading*] "I didn't like going to school. Every morning I would hold tightly to my brother's jacket and follow behind him ..."

Without any clear link to the *My Hiroshima* reference about oranges and lemons, the topic shifts to 'games'. The students clearly take up and maintain the topic with interest. Evidently, they perceive that participation in 'experiential' talk is the main concern.

Just as suddenly, the focus swings back to the text, and reading resumes. However, the students' talk indicates that the topic of 'games' is still the main focus. Emon and William maintain the games topic; they don't 'catch on to' the phase change to text reading.

William: I can't play that. **T:** Well you'll have to get Dad to teach you, or Emon — he can play it, can't you? **Emon:** Not really that good. **T:** Right, back to this.	During this whole first segment of the lesson, the intended focus — to do poetry-writing using 'feeling' words — is never mentioned.

Because of their implicit talk, interactions like those transcribed above clearly exclude some members of the class from gaining access to the literacy purpose of the lesson. In the first instance, the students were not privy to the main concern of the lesson — writing poetry. Secondly, the purpose of using the text was not made clear, and did not orientate students' thinking towards the use of 'feeling words' in writing. And thirdly, manoeuvring the talk from topic to topic distracted the students — leaving them to guess, or catch on to by chance, what the teacher really wanted them to learn.

Topical detours such as those highlighted here — loose and often free-ranging in content — not only compromise meaningful literacy learning, but reflect an interactive environment that is in a state of constant structural negotiation. Turn-taking opportunities are offered, withdrawn and cut off for reasons that are not evident. Students' options — who can say what — appear to be random. In all, these interactions often appear as 'light conversation'. It is evidence that teachers often do not establish, and/or refer back to, clear talk structures. In such circumstances, students can never be 'on task', since the task itself is indeterminate.

To further illustrate, the students have been told that the lesson recorded below is about learning to spell particular words from the weekly list. The transcript shows how the focus of classroom talk often has a tenuous relationship to the intended outcomes.

Transcript 2.7

Classroom context: Year 4 – learning how to spell the list words

T: 'Piglets' — let's look at that word. Now as we said a moment ago, young pigs are called? **S:** [*Together*] Piglets. **T:** There's a very famous piglet, in books. **S:** I know.	Within this part of the spelling lesson, the talk turns to a 20-minute discussion on *Babe* the movie. The talk centres on pigs, the site where the film

T: Who is it? **S:** Babe. **T:** Oh — I wasn't thinking of Babe, but that's not a bad answer, is it? I was thinking of another piglet, and Babe has beaten us all; Babe started out as a piglet then grew into a pig ... **S:** And he was ... **T:** Uhh ... **S:** Piglet out of *Winnie the Pooh*. **T:** Yes, the piglet in *Winnie the Pooh* was what I was thinking of, but that's a good answer, Babe — I'll have to accept that one, seeing as, has anyone seen *Babe*?	was made, sheep dogs, and so on. At no point is 'how to spell piglets' approached in any significant way. The discussion appears to be taken up as a 'good thing to talk about'. Teachers often view such practices as inclusive, assuming that students interpret them as deliberate digression.

The 'lesson' above appeared as an everyday conversation roaming around the topic of piglets (and other list words as they arose). It is true that the orientation to the topic of piglets, in this scenario, enables all students to 'participate'. However, no support is provided for those students who don't know how to spell the word 'piglet', or who might benefit from generalisable spelling principles or strategies. In other words, the interaction appears to be inclusive in the social sense, but is exclusive in the educational sense. The teacher is responding to student interest in the topic of the moment, rather than supporting students to learn anything much about spelling. While students who operate only within their comfort and interest zone may enjoy their classroom experience, they are unlikely to learn a great deal without challenge and commensurate support.*

** This is a point elaborated in Chapter 1 of the PETA book 'Scaffolding' (Hammond, ed., 2001).*

It is important to note that the mere mention of 'literacy-type' words (for example, that this is a "spelling lesson") does not ensure that learning will take place (that students will learn to spell). It cannot be taken here that the simple orientation to a spelling activity means that a spelling lesson has been given and that knowledge or process skills around spelling have been learned. In fact, as this book will go on to show, the best evidence of such learning is on-task talk and on-task behaviour.

In viewing lessons like those presented here from a socio-cultural perspective, we need to ask ourselves continually "What messages are we leaving our students with?". What the students learn here is that talk about 'themes' or familiar topics is the primary focus.

They learn that learning how to spell means successfully participating in topical talk, engaging in the theme. The everyday conversational topic 'farm animals' appears to drive the lesson, and references to literacy learning are incidental or hidden.

After this lesson, the teacher described the discussion as "terrific, because all the kids were involved". After reading the transcript, however, the teacher shifted his view on what went on.

> **In reading my transcripts I thought: "Where is the literacy learning?". I think we were encouraged to let lessons go off onto any tangent. Letting the topic go in any direction was seen as good, but I don't allow that to happen now. Now, what the [research] findings have shown me is that I have permission to say: "Okay, that's not really what we are talking about now; we are actually talking about such and such" ... [the students] keep focused and on track, and on learning about specific aspects of literacy.**
>
> ***Year 4 teacher***

Chapter 3 will look closely at what constitutes a 'lesson'. For now, it is worth observing that a lesson is not an activity or task; it is not a set of texts or resources that teachers use; it is not a teaching program, a curriculum document or its prescribed outcomes; nor is it the grouping arrangements or the even the product of activity. While all of these elements contribute to a lesson, they remain vehicles that are utilised in the process of *interaction that leads to learning*. If there is no learning, there is no lesson, however much 'schooling' activity may have occurred.

Wrapping it up: Lesson review

This part of the lesson involves interactions that help learner and teacher to recount or review learning. It can make explicit links between lesson introductions, lesson purposes and instructional sequences in relation to nominated learning goals.

Time for review of literacy learning at the end of lessons is a crucial component of productive classroom interaction. Frequently, however, lesson reviews are absent (Edwards-Groves, 1998). Lessons generally conclude with a simple 'wrap–up' statement, and there is little evidence that instructional talk supports reflection on learning. Lessons are more often concluded with a signal to 'pack up' rather than an interactive opportunity to harness and review learning.

The next example documents a lesson that is stopped abruptly without orientation to the literacy-learning objectives or any review of the primary lesson points. What is reinforced here is the notion that the lesson is for *producing and completing work*, regardless of what aspect of literacy is the focus.

Transcript 2.8

Classroom context: Year 2/3 – cloze comprehension sheet

T: Okay, okay, come on. Please sit down, that's enough of that ... I think, you're getting a bit noisy — I hope you're finished that sheet, otherwise you can do it for homework. [*Background chatter*]	The lesson concludes with a brief signal and a remark indicating to students that completing the task is the primary concern. There are no links to learning about literacy.

Similarly, the next lesson is terminated without a concluding review about any aspect of learning.

Transcript 2.9

Classroom context: Year 4 – spelling activities related to list words

T: Pack up — the bell's gone. Come on now, tidy up your desks and put the dictionaries away; you can do that, Elise ...	The bell acts as a signal to stop the lesson without any review of learning. Attending to organisational matters is the primary focus of the lesson conclusion.

In contrast, the teacher in the next example clearly guides students to the literacy learning that has happened in the lesson. This type of review sends a very different message about what counts as important — that is, specific literacy learning.

Transcript 2.10

Classroom context: Year 4/5/6 – writing news reports

T: Okay, before we move on to our reading, let's recap on what we have been learning. There was a pattern that is in most news reports that we have been learning about. Give me a 'w' word that we use when we're writing news reports — Phillipa? [*Pause*] There's five to choose from.	The teacher focuses the talk on what was learnt. It clearly relates to the aspect of literacy learning that was the main point of the lesson. The teacher here is motivated by the absence of this kind of review in previous classroom lessons (see the teacher comments below).

What we learn from these examples is that talk which has the purpose of reviewing or summarising specific aspects of learning is a feature of productive classroom interaction, and is an effective teaching practice. The lesson review is a significant and influential way to connect learning purposes to learning outcomes for students. The teachers in my study recognised this.

> **Remembering to allow time in the lesson for a review of learning is a big area of change for me. ... Straight away I knew what needed to be retaught. The pauses in some of the children's responses really told me that they were still not exactly sure what the format of a newspaper report was, and I knew straight away where we should go on to in the next lesson. For some of the kids it was clear that more examples of actual newspaper reports were needed, and maybe I could get them to use a highlighter to isolate different parts ...**
>
> ***Year 4/5/6 teacher***

> **It provides us with information about what needs reteaching. I think the review is not only a good way of ending a lesson, but so that the children can see that there was a certain purpose for the activities that we expect them to do. It can give you direction as to which children understand — formative assessment that can be used for future planning. Or the teacher can quickly note or respond to misconceptions made by the students; they might discover where the learning has taken the children, which may not have been seen before, if you assumed too much, too little.**
>
> ***Year 2/3 teacher***

In summary, the lesson review:

- provides information about what needs reteaching
- indicates which students have gained solid understanding
- acts as formative assessment
- can be used for future planning
- engages the learners in the total learning process
- enables a system of independent self-evaluation
- allows students to articulate their own learning in relation to the stated focus
- is a partnership in evaluation because the students know what was expected and how they were able to demonstrate it, and how well they understood or learnt it.

> **[Explicit teaching] lets the children in on the big secret of what this lesson is all about by allowing them in on what we're going to be doing, and what they should know at the end ... one of the main issues for teachers is child-centred learning and learning as partnership. So with this in mind I believe explicit teaching makes the learning more equitable for all children in our classrooms. It works towards narrowing the gap between the power and authority of the teacher and children in classrooms.**
>
> ***Year 4 Teacher***

Explaining the learning focus does not mean students have limited input into their learning. The opposite is true: offering students up-front, explicit information about lesson purposes, and the processes for learning, frees them to explore their world and their learning endeavours with greater precision. They will know what is of primary relevance for *this* lesson at *this* time, and they will know what is useful and relevant to take to new learning situations.

> **I think it allows them more power over their learning by having a greater sense of achievement and accomplishment, as they actually are aware of what outcomes they are supposed to be meeting. They can be clear in saying "I know this and I know where I am going with this", and "I am getting better at this" — you can't divorce that from their own self-evaluation and a sense of success at the end of the lesson.**
>
> ***Year 2/3/4 teacher***

Reflecting

In today's schools, catering for a wide range of learners is a key matter of concern facing teachers on a day-to-day basis. On-task, focused talk — through a system of explicit teaching — has the power to make the literacy curriculum more accessible to more learners in any one classroom.

All lessons have the potential to provide explicit information to students about the cognitive aspects and specific task demands of the literacy learning. Meaningful teaching and learning takes place when students clearly hear and understand the literacy-learning task and lesson structure. Students do not have access to the lesson

purpose unless it is clearly, and publicly, set out for them from the onset of the learning episode, and maintained throughout.

A lesson is productive when the learning focus is reflected in the talk of students and teachers through all instructional points of the lesson. This focus should not be overridden by 'everyday' or familiar topics of talk, nor by management and organisational routines.

By focusing on the interactive consequences of the learning environment in this chapter, the following features of productive teaching through explicit, on-task talk have emerged

Features of explicit teaching as effective pedagogy

Explicit, on-task teaching:

- informs students of the learning path by providing them with up-front information on lesson purposes and processes
- prepares students for their learning
- engages student thinking about the primary topic of learning
- attaches meaning to literacy learning
- creates opportunities for students to interact purposefully with their learning by allowing them to know the path along which to focus their thinking and activity
- focuses specifically on learning
- builds a genuine culture of learning in the classroom by allowing students to be informed partners in their own education
- works towards equitability for students in their own learning community
- involves a clear, progressive lesson structure that involves introduction–elaboration–practice–summary/review
- reflects deliberate and focused planning in relation to learning outcomes, which is mirrored in the classroom talk
- enables students to develop metacognitive strategies for knowing that learning has taken place
- involves critical and reflective thinking.

Refocusing

For their teaching to be effective, teachers must:

- understand that lessons are an interactive event by monitoring classroom talk (a focus of chapter 3)
- know and respond to the learner (a focus of chapter 4)
- implement focused lessons through a framework of interactive teaching (a focus of chapter 5)
- join their students in considered reflection and review (a focus of chapter 6).

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3

Literacy lessons built on interaction

Using this approach has helped me understand about what I am doing in the classroom, and what the kids are doing, too. It also helped me to learn the importance of the talk that goes on in the classroom. I knew it was important but, really, I took it for granted. And straight away, after reading my transcripts, I knew I had to think more carefully about my talk and change what I said to the kids and how I said it.

Year 4 teacher

Each classroom is a unique social site that provides the interactive and physical context for student learning. Classroom talk is distinctive and easily recognisable. The talk of the classroom shapes the context for learning and, ultimately, shapes and builds the learning culture of the classroom. Simultaneously, it organises students for learning and mediates the learning itself.

At the same time as they are enabling teaching and learning, classroom interactions are also constructing roles and relationships between teachers and students. All of the participants in the classroom use their knowledge of the context to generate appropriate behaviour (for example, raising hands to answer a question), and the appropriateness of that behaviour, in turn, serves to define further the context in which they interact (Edwards & Furlong, 1979).

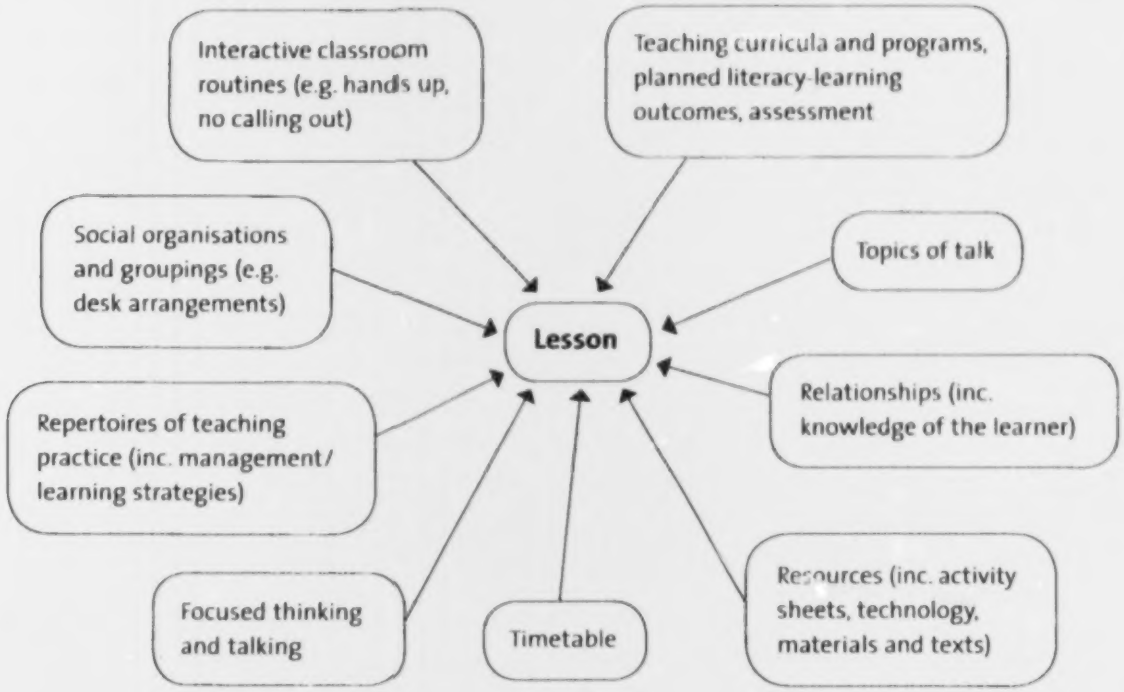
Students learn the ways of the school and the classroom by operating within them. Importantly, they acquire literacies by participating in the interactive routines that *are embedded in classroom* activities (Gee, 2002). It follows, then, that the success of literacy learning events — in effect, what students take from literacy lessons — hinges on teacher–student interactions. This chapter unravels what is accomplished by, and through, the talk of the classroom lesson.

What makes a lesson

If we look through the door of any classroom, what do we find going on? What do we see? What do we hear?

We might see grouped students, a teacher at a board, desks, displayed artwork, Erica's caged blue-tongue lizard, a computer table, a library corner, a display board. At the same time, we might hear the teacher organising the students to get their books ready for reading groups and asking Lan to take a note to the office, a small group of students chatting at the computer table at the back of the room, Zeb being asked not to call out and to wait to be asked to speak. Fig. 3.1 depicts the interrelated factors that work together to shape a lesson into a learning event.

Figure 3.1: Elements that contribute to a lesson


Interactive classroom routines (e.g. hands up, no calling out)
Teaching curricula and programs, planned literacy-learning outcomes, assessment
Social organisations and groupings (e.g. desk arrangements)
Topics of talk
Lesson
Relationships (inc. knowledge of the learner)
Repertoires of teaching practice (inc. management/ learning strategies)
Resources (inc. activity sheets, technology, materials and texts)
Focused thinking and talking
Timetable

Classrooms are arenas of varied yet constant activity overlaid with rapid-fire and complicated patterns of talk. The student's task is to discover what is to be learned and how to demonstrate that it has been learned. The teacher's task is to co-ordinate the medley of factors that contribute to effective learning. Teachers therefore need to explore the concept of 'lesson' in depth. What do we understand a lesson to be? What is taking place?

These questions are best considered by viewing the lesson on two interconnected levels:

- the *macro* level — the highly visible and tangible aspect of a lesson (Anstey & Bull, 2003). This relates to what can be seen in the classroom, for example a reading scheme or texts, wall posters, resources and materials, technologies, a strategy or activity sheet, student grouping arrangements, desk placements. It also relates to the teaching program, or perhaps the curriculum that may shape classroom structures and resources.
- the *micro* level — the social dimension of the classroom, the minute-by-minute unfolding of a lesson (Anstey & Bull, 2003). This involves the interactive dynamics, especially the talk, of the classroom. Micro-level interactions give life, meaning and relevance to what is viewed at the macro level.

It is at the point of the talk that the macro features (in particular the learning agenda) meet the students. Learning occurs as a result of interactive support provided at the micro, or task, level, when it is appropriately located within the macro framework of a planned program (Hammond & Gibbons, 2001). The talk of the classroom needs to reflect a clear relationship between sequential tasks so that these tasks relate to articulated program and curriculum goals. Therefore we need to look critically at the micro level to determine how learning unfolds.

Classroom lessons as interactive events

Good literacy lessons are focused yet interactive. The learning here will not rest with the visible tools (PC, dictionary) or materials (Harry Potter novel) but with talk that is built on a shared understanding about the purpose of *this* lesson at *this* time.

The contributions of students indicate what *they* understand a lesson to be about. By focusing on these contributions, a complete redefinition of a 'lesson' emerges. Conventionally, lessons were conceptualised on the macro level; however, studies such as those by Freebody, Ludwig and Gunn (1995) show that what drives the lesson, typically, are the action and interaction initiatives of the teacher, the compliance of students, and the successful completion of activities (or the production of work).

Transcripts of classroom talk, such as the one below, reveal a highly complex set of interpersonal interactions that serve simultaneously to assemble the social relationships between teacher and students and to organise student learning.

Transcript 3.1

T: What we're talking about is what we did on the weekend. Now I've already told you I went skiing and stuff like that on the weekend as well, but also I watched some TV shows. Hands up if you watched TV on the weekend. [*Students raise hands*] Whatya watch, James?

James: Ah, umm ...

T: Whatcha watch, Lucy? Did you watch any television on the weekend?

Lucy: Cartoons.

Lessons are an evolving interactive process. The transcript above demonstrates that talk is at the core of the interpersonal and intellectual relationships between teachers and students. What is talked about or learned (*what we did on the weekend*) is inextricably linked with the social organisation of the classroom (*hands up and nominating turns at talk*).

Reading transcripts or listening to taped lessons enables teachers to 'work over' a lesson to discover what it reveals on a moment-by-moment, turn-by-turn basis. Transcripts are capable of showing teachers what they are *really* teaching in their classrooms, helping them to theorise about literacy lessons in a way that conceptualises learning as interaction. They also allow teachers to reflect on whether similar or different approaches might be useful in future lessons.

Regardless of which texts or curriculum documents are used, it is through the medium of talk, and what that talk is about, that the learning event unfolds. Essentially, it has four main purposes. It serves to:

- develop roles and relationships
- organise the learner
- manage behaviour
- support learning and teaching.

We will look closely at each of these categories in the following sections, taking the focus directly to the micro level. Each section will show how teachers operate at this fundamental level of practice, and how teachers' direction of talk can support meaningful learning about aspects of literacy.

Developing roles and relationships

It is well documented that teachers do most of the talking in classrooms (Edwards & Westgate, 1987) and ask most of the questions (Baker & Freebody, 1989). They normally control the talk by signalling to students when to talk, what to talk about and how well they talked. A characteristic of classroom interaction is that the teacher regulates student responses and turns at talk. The relative status (in terms of authority and knowledge) of teacher and student is made visible in the talk. Teacher–Student relationships are overtly constructed to reinforce the interactive power and knowledge of the teacher.

Transcript 3.2

T: Okay guys, hands up, 's' words. [*Points randomly around the room*]

S: Sausage.

T: No, *describing* words, thanks. [*Points around the room*]

S: Snake.

T: I've got that, got that already. [*Points around the room*]

S: Silly.

S: Stupid.

T: Yes. Chase? [*Points around the room*]

Chase: Slop.

T: Mmm ...

S: Skate.

T: Anna?

Anna: Scary.

Notice that student turns are allocated by pointing to the next speaker and/or by nominating the next speaker. Teacher-controlled interactive routines are embedded in the classroom culture. They function to control student behaviour, classroom interaction and the pace of the learning.

Teachers use quite particular questioning devices to construct knowledge in the learning context. Questioning patterns are established as routine interactive mechanisms while serving to reinforce the teacher's authority. Transcript examples underscore the point that teachers initiate almost all the questions and are the main commentators on the quality of the answers and the topics of talk — and they are the only commentators on the correctness of answers. According to Edwards and Westgate (1987), the way in which teachers discard answers that they judge to be irrelevant, insufficient, or simply wrong — and re-allocate the question to someone else to answer — is a distinctive feature of classroom interaction that serves to establish the authoritative role of the teacher and further define classroom relationships.

'Right-answer-seeking techniques' (French & MacLure, 1980), which ask students to 'guess what the teacher is thinking', produce a typical interactive routine. It arises when the teacher has a particular answer in mind and deems no other suitable. This pseudo-questioning strategy forms part of an interaction first seen in Chapter 2.

Transcript 3.3

T: There's a very famous piglet, in books.

S: I know.

T: Who is it?

S: Babe.

T: Oh — I wasn't thinking of Babe, but that's not a bad answer, is it? I was thinking of another piglet, and Babe has beaten us all; Babe started out as a piglet then grew into a pig ...

The three-part structure *question–answer–evaluation* is a major method used by teachers to seek 'right' answers.

Question:	Have you been to see any fireworks?
Answer:	Yep/Yes/No.
Evaluation:	Good.

These kinds of pedagogical routines — jointly produced by teachers and students but with the teacher as 'power broker' or regulator — generally serve to structure the interaction in a way that limits students' interactive options. In theory, an environment with limited options should produce little trouble. There are occasions, however, in which misunderstanding or 'interactive trouble' is prolonged to the extent that students do not cue into the perspective represented in the teacher's talk (Freiberg & Freebody, 1995).

Teachers at once regulate classroom interactions while seeking to open up opportunities for learner contributions. The success of this learning episode does not hinge on learners visibly 'doing the teacher's bidding' but on the deeper understanding of the processes of procedure-writing that are evident in interactions.

Organising the learner

As they become acculturated into 'being literate' in the everyday world, students learn associated *on-task* behaviours. Complying with school social and organisational routines — raising hands, speaking one at a time, turn-taking — is often a priority as students are learning about aspects of literacy. Lessons are often taken to be successful because students display appropriate on-task behaviours, rather than displays of something learnt. The transcript example below shows how participation in the lesson requires students to go along with the interactive routines or patterns of the classroom.

Transcript 3.4

Classroom context: Year 1 – learning about text characters from *Mrs Wishy-Washy*

T: Okay, let's have a look at this picture here, up here on this page. Here we have those naughty characters, and aren't they getting into an awful mess. [*Background chatter*] Sitting down, everyone — get in a spot where you can see. [*Children shuffling around*] Right, who are the characters in this story, those messy ...	Within this part of a book-reading lesson, school routines and participation rights (waiting to be nominated for a turn to talk, not calling out, raising hands) are clearly

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Mitchell: Pig, the duck. **T:** Oh no, you don't call out when we're doing our reading, Mitchell. We've got to what? Carmon? **Carmon:** Put our hands up. **T:** Yes, what else, yes? **S:** Wait your turn. **T:** Wait your turn, good ... **S:** Don't call out. **T:** Good boy, yes, that's right — when we're doing our reading groups, please remember those important Year 1 rules in our reading: no calling out, hands up and waiting for your turn. Now, back to the picture, who are these messy characters here? Oh, look here ...	understood by teacher and students. Doing 'school reading' means behaving in a particular way.

The fact that Mrs Wishy-Washy was the device used in this lesson does not mean that students learnt anything new about reading. On the contrary: the instructional excursions, led by the teacher, were taken up by the students. They heard that compliance with particular interactive routines was of paramount importance when learning to read. In fact, displaying appropriate social behaviours can be taken to *be* the learning in this example. The lesson here is that students must learn how to participate appropriately in order to achieve literacy success — one is clearly taken to hinge on the other. It must be said, too, that the transcript shows how students participate in constructing classroom interactions. In other words, students participate in their own learning, whether or not literacy learning is the outcome.

At its core, this 'surface-level' talk centres on managerial instructions that control and organise 'schooling', as opposed to literacy learning. In these situations, teachers tend to focus on socialisation within the classroom rather than on literacy processes or content. This form of talk produces and focuses on known school routines. It sometimes involves talk about classroom resources and materials (e.g. *What book? Where are the books? Can we use textas? Where do we sit? Can we draw pictures? Where are the scissors? Who is handing out the glue pots?*).

Interactive practices often relate directly to a particular theory about childhood or learning. The following interactive practices (adapted from Freiberg & Freebody, 1995)

describe what the teacher does to organise student learning through the talk of the classroom, and how literacy-learning events evolve and take shape as lessons. Each practice is supported by explanatory excerpts from classroom transcripts.

Wait and see

Teachers publicly invite students to 'wait and see' or 'wonder' about what is to come. Teachers act as gatekeepers of the knowledge and of the lesson process. All will be revealed when the teacher decides. It is linked to a *game-like* activity of prediction or guesswork.

Transcript 3.5

Classroom context: Year 2/3 – reading with story-writing follow-up

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T: I'm gonna ask you two in a minute — there's something in this picture. There's an animal in this picture, can you see it?

S: [*Together*] Yes/Yes/Yes.

S: It's a caterpillar.

T: Can you see [what it is]? Wait, wait — don't call out, you'll spoil it for the others. I wonder what this book might be about?

S: A story about caterpillars.

T: Ri-ight, good. I wonder what happens to the caterpillars in this story; use your imagination. What do you think it could be about? What will happen to them? What will they do? Come on, now, thinking caps on ...

This "play-like wondering" (Freebody, Ludwig & Gunn, 1995) is shown to 'string kids along'. The practice has a direct bearing on the learning made available to students. It can be viewed as a motivational step that is based on a theory of childhood that suggests children are engaged when they are playing games or guessing. However, it is a practice that can obscure the specific goals of an activity. Often the focus of the talk moves freely to thematic discussions about a range of 'everyday' topics or shared experiences.

Answers become provisional answers become guesses

Students display an acceptance that their answers are provisional, in the sense that they are offered to the teachers as questions with an upward vocal intonation.

Transcript 3.6

Classroom context: Year 2/3/4 – shared big-book reading

T: It's nice if we could talk about the nature of creatures that are predators because, 'cos actually foxes and cats, what are they? What's the word for them? **S:** Feral? **T:** Yes, feral.	The student's response, "feral", is conditional until the teacher accepts and nominates the answer 'correct'.

It is not until teachers 'evaluate' the response that the answer is considered acceptable, incomplete or merely an unacceptable guess.

Which context

The context of school lessons shapes the talk of teaching and learning; reciprocally, the talk of teaching and learning shapes the context for learning — the classroom, the school. As a result, the talk observed in school settings is quite distinctive.

Transcript 3.7

Classroom context: Year 4 – shared reading of class text with character rating sheet as follow-up

T: Thank you — do you people wish to rejoin the class?

S: [*Together*] Yes.

T: Are you going to follow the class rules?

S: [*Together*] Yes.

T: What's the next step?

S: Outside.

T: Right, sit down then. Just remember that it's not fair to other people if you mess up and be silly when we're reading, and that was very silly, wasn't it?

S: Yep. .

T: Right, thank you, come and sit down here. Yes? Right, everyone else: pencils down, hands on heads. Go! Hands on heads. You too — you're a part of this class. Hurry up, Andy, I want to see if everyone's ready. Now, what do we do if we're reading? Everyone?

S: [*Together*] Hands on heads / Put your hands on your heads / Sit quietly / Listen.

T: Right, now, yes — we sit quietly and listen, hands on heads ...

Both teacher and students clearly acknowledge the context for learning to read in schools. Following class rules is explicitly linked to reading in schools. Students associate 'hands on heads' and sitting quietly with learning to read and with what's important in reading.

Routines as teaching and learning

In this practice, routines replace substance. It is easy, but erroneous, to equate teaching with learning. In the following interaction, the mere completion of a known and structured pedagogical routine — a 'big book' lesson — is taken by the participants to be successful teaching and learning, even though it is not demonstrated in the students' talk.

Transcript 3.8

Classroom context: Year 2/3/4 – shared reading of big book and writing about terrariums

T: There's something in this picture. There's an animal in this picture — can you see it?	There is no explicit identification of the direction of the learning — no links between the 'big book' text reading and the follow-up writing activity.
(There is a brief discussion in which students identify a lizard and its characteristics.)	
T: But it looks as if it's made out of — it's *camouflaged*, isn't it? That was that other big word we learnt; well, let's have a look at it ... and there it is, it does look — what's he look as if he's got on him?	
(There is lengthy discussion about camouflage, feral animals, predators and prey.)	Discussion is neither linked to the reading of the text nor to the writing response (an informative text about terrariums) that will follow.
T: I've got a lot of calling out; could we take turns? Because some people are having all the talking and some people aren't getting a say, are they Ruth? What did you want to say?	
Ruth: Ahh ...	
T: It's nice if we could talk about the nature of creatures that are predators because, cos actually foxes and cats, what are they? What's the word for them?	
S: Feral?	
T: Yeah, feral.	

S: Feral.

T: We have plenty of feral animals around here on the farms, don't we? What does your dad do with ferals on your farms?

S: My dad shoots 'em.

S: So does mine.

T: Okay, now hang on — we're having a bit of a read, I've got it ... cover up ... right-o ... and sitting there beautifully listening is Lucas, so let's read about this one.

Lucas: "What's the animal hidden in the leaves?" [*Background talk*]

T: Keep reading.

Lucas: "It's hidden on ... an owl."

T: So, what's its predator?

S: [*Together*] An owl, owl!

(The whole-class big-book reading continues, with lengthy discussions about each animal in the book.)

T: Yeah, they're both down there, so that's very good what?

T/S: [*Together*] Camouflage.

T: Yes, so we've really got that word really well; thank you for ... there are two little books of that, so anyone who wants to take that home for a reader can borrow it. Okay, thanks for that, Kristen — I'll put that away, cos it's dangerous. All right now, the next bit, the next thing we're gonna do — I'll put my things down and can't find them again — is write about ... what we discovered about the terrarium and how to make some water for our mantids. I had some [sheets] ... yes, I've got them [*Various utterances from students*] and Year 4 have done this before, so I thought it might be good if we did this with our partners, because Year 4 then can help — because, I think, everyone in Year 4's got a Year 2 partner, haven't they?

S: Yep. [*Various utterances from students*]

Reading the book and sharing related experiences appears as the productive 'literacy' activity. It is taken to be a successful literacy-learning experience.

However, reading the text is incidental to the purpose of writing about terrariums. Reading for reading's sake occurs, rather than learning about a particular aspect of literacy.

Successful literacy learning is judged to have occurred because of the interactive nature of the discussion and the presence of a book. It takes almost an hour for the teacher to arrive at the lesson purpose.

Trail and collect

This type of questioning routine is distinctive in school-type talk. The teacher poses a single question with the view of collecting a list of student answers. The teacher repeats responses as they are offered. Students need to catch onto the fact that this 'trailing' is in operation. They often demonstrate knowledge of how to take part in this procedure, but not always when to stop taking part. Transcript 3.2 (p 40) shows an episode in which students are seamlessly able to take up this routine, which the teacher directs by naming and pointing.

Activity- and literature-based learning

Topics, activities and literature-based texts provide the context for school talk. Out of this talk, opportunities emerge for incidental learning about aspects of literacy. Learning organised around activities generates tasks that are fun to do but where the real learning purpose has been lost. For example, students may take some time to complete a story map of a narrative and lose sight of the fact that the map is only an end in itself. The real purpose — remembering a story line for retelling — is easily lost. So, what starts out as a *useful strategy* — something that might be used in a number of different learning areas — becomes trivialised into *an activity or a game* (Anstey & Bull, 2003).

Transcript 3.9

Classroom context: Year 4 – reading *Possum Magic* with follow-up comprehension

T: Now, you were cutting out pictures, weren't you? Of all these different foods that they ate ... what did they eat?	The text in this lesson provides the context for thematic talk about 'favourite foods'.
S: We couldn't find some.	
T: Hmm? That's right, so we ended up having to draw those ones ourselves, didn't we? Can you remember what they ate? Yes?	
S: Steak?	
Harry: I like steak.	
T: Do you? Who else likes steak? [*Students raise hands*] I love it with pepper sauce ...	
S: Oh, yuck.	
T: Okay, if you were Possum Magic, what would be you favourite food?	

Bill: McDonald's. **T:** Is that in the book? **S:** [*Chorusing*] No. **T:** But he might like it, I suppose — I don't like it myself ... **S:** Big Macs, I love eating those ... **S:** Me too, and fries. **T:** I've heard the breakfasts are good. **S:** We go there on Saturdays sometimes ... **T:** Okay now, what else? Yes, Mary. **Mary:** Hungry Jack's.	The thematic talk is taken up with ease by all class members, and appears as a conversation rather than anything about learning an aspect of literacy.

Resources for learning

Classroom resources drive the interactive participation of students. The learning event hinges on particular groupings and social organisations. Teachers use a range of interactive strategies to arrange teaching and learning groups, and much classroom talk is allocated to these arrangements.

Transcript 3.10

Classroom context: Year2/3/4 – learning how to read TV guides and recognise their parts

T: I watched that too last night — funny, funny movie. Now you can't watch television — well, *I* don't think you can — without having some lollies. I like to have a little bit of a nibble while I watch television — though, don't eat it yet. Jelly baby for you. [*Handing out lollies*] Jelly baby. Right, this is what I'm going to ask you to do in a minute. I'll tell you when you can eat your jelly baby, depending on how good you are. Right, I want you to go and sit next to someone with the same coloured jelly baby as you've got now. So, if you've got a red one, go and sit, find someone with a red jelly baby and sit next to them. You'll be working with them together this morning. [*Students move around the room. Soft chatter*] Hands up if you haven't got one the same colour as somebody. **S:** I haven't. **T:** Right, you might like to work in a three coz, because James is away, there is not going to be even numbers this morning.	How the students are organised into groups is the primary focus. 'Jelly babies' are the focus of the talk.

Each segment of classroom talk presented here illustrates that the talk encountered in classrooms shapes roles and relationships, shapes the learning of specific content, process skills and attitudes, and provides an overt display of 'what counts as important' in the lessons on literacy. The excerpts highlight the point that learning literacy is regularly constructed as learning how to act and interact as a student. Being a successful *student*, therefore, is regularly interpreted as being a successful learner.

Managing behaviour

As we have seen, students learn that literacy learning is linked to behaving in a particular way in classrooms, and that it is within 'school-type' talk that literacy learning is achieved. As we have also seen, teachers often assume that successful participation in school routines indicates successful teaching and learning. Unfortunately, it is all too easy to consider those who are complying with classroom norms to be the 'best students'.

By their very nature, reading and writing within the classroom require the full attention of students so that they can monitor what is being read or written. Interruptions and disturbances can adversely affect this monitoring. Disturbances limit the level of focused engagement that students can give to their work. Effective practitioners therefore ensure that interruptions are kept to a minimum and employ management practices that maximise the learning time and the task engagement of students.

Examination of classroom literacy practice shows that in many classrooms, explicit teaching is almost routinely directed to developing classroom participation skills and behaviour rather than to developing specific literacy knowledge and skills. Literacy learning becomes a 'given' that does not need to be explicitly articulated. As a result, it is sidelined. Regular shifts to focus on logistical and managerial issues in the classroom suspend the focus of the pedagogy.

'Lessons for all' is an interactive management strategy that teachers routinely employ to teach all students about the right way to behave, or to reinforce a particular moral order. Consider the example below, recorded in a literacy lesson.

Transcript 3.11

Classroom context: Year 4 – reading groups

T: Right, good. I want you to go back and find those four answers ... Look, don't worry what someone else is doing, Gary. See those pieces that fall down there? You were told to put them somewhere.	The literacy focus is suspended to attend to managerial issues. The pep talk (the lesson about rubbish)

You'll be telling me tomorrow you can't find them. Trim them up and stick them in your book somewhere; put them in loosely. All these little bits and pieces of rubbish — I want you to put them in the correct place now. Remember, everyone, it's litter if it's lying around, and if it's put in a rubbish bin it's not litter, it's garbage — there's a difference. You must learn that. Now, Ari, go back to your desk and get to work. [*Student moving to put rubbish in bins*] Everybody seated and mouths turned off when you're doing reading groups. I'm going to speak to one group at a time and I don't want to be interrupted, Kate. When I come to your group, be ready to participate and co-operate and join in. Now, back to work ...	reflects a local moral order. Commentary on acceptable student behaviour (what you must learn in order to participate) is the main thrust of many segments of talk in this classroom.

Everyday behaviour management of classrooms is, of course, necessary. It is not practical to suggest that teachers should not attend to behaviour. The challenge is to recognise that regular attention to management is a threat to learning, and to consider individualised behaviour management that does not override the learning focus for the whole class. The theme of moral order should not dominate the talk of the classroom. It is often so pervasive that many lessons reveal a seamless drift into and out of 'behaviour' talk.

Transcript 3.12

Classroom context: Year 4 – spelling groups

T: You can go and have a ruler, Jessica, seeing you are having a lot of trouble getting your own ruler. How 'bout you ask Mum to get you one for your birthday? Baz, go and borrow a ruler. Harry? **Harry:** Um, at recess ... Riley [*indistinct*] in my bag. **T:** Where was your bag? Come on, David, your silliness is really annoying me now. **Harry:** In the locker room. **T:** And he was in this locker room — everyone listening? **Harry:** Yes, because ...	Throughout this (ostensibly) spelling lesson, talk addressing student behaviour, aimed at keeping students on task, weaves with talk about the spelling-group process and with talk supporting spelling itself.

T: No, no, I — you're telling the story; I'll listen to you ... later on, I can't discuss it now. I'll check him out. Remember to listen carefully for the word, listen for it; are you listening, Harry? In the sentence case, there's more than one way to spell the word, to find which word you are attempting to spell; don't forget if it's got syllables, tap them out in your hand, and if it has three syllables, make sure when you attempt the word your attempt has three syllables ... have you got those pages ruled yet, girls? The theme for this week — anyone? Aron?

Aron: Farmyard animals.

T: Farmyard animals. Harry, I don't want to have to keep speaking to you, but if you're not going to start coming around the front, I'm going to do something about you. Sit around quietly; put your feet right around and co-operate. Animals belonging to the farmyard, you're probably thinking of some in your minds now. Who remembers going out to, ah, the Clydesdale stud, a few years ago?

The teachers in my study reflected closely on this kind of instructional talk. One teacher made these observations.

> **I see that the management of behaviour can really run in and take away a lot of valuable time from actual teaching and learning. It's not until you actually observe yourself, and look at those transcripts from a child's point of view, that you see how has this affected lesson continuity for them. If you think about how has this lesson progressed in the child's eyes, I realised that talk relating to behaviour management was more of an issue and more widespread than what I would have thought before. I can actually see the impact on the success of the lesson in terms of how the learning is being interrupted.**
>
> ***Year 4 teacher***

This teacher is concerned about how much of the learning space is taken up with talk that attends to behavioural and managerial issues. The teacher recognises that attention to behaviour specifically relates to the effectiveness of student learning.

Teachers therefore need to consider these questions.

- Is the whole class called away from the learning task to attend to every misdemeanour?
- Does one indiscretion trigger 'a lesson for all' on how to behave correctly?

- Does the lesson focus shift from literacy learning to the 'right way to behave', where a strong sense of moral order is the main concern?
- How regularly does management talk cut across instruction?
- Are orientations to student behaviour formalised and systematic, or informal and incidental?
- Is a particular 'pep talk' system recruited to manage student behaviour?

Literacy learning must remain the focal topic of talk in any literacy lesson, because meaningful learning comes from meaningful talk. Therefore we need to be mindful of what we focus our interaction on. Is it: the learning outcomes? the texts? the resources? the theme? the groups? the activity? the product? the behaviour of students?

Teaching and learning

This is the pre-eminent purpose for talk in classrooms. When it serves the purposes of literacy teaching and learning, talk introduces, develops and resolves literacy topics by focusing on the specific literacy content and processes that are nominated for instruction. Specific literacy learning is maintained as the primary purpose of the lesson. On-task talk is associated with on-task thinking and on-task behaviour.

The three other categories of classroom talk that have been described (developing roles and relationships, organising the learner, managing behaviour) are essential at different times. But it is important that teachers' talk does not stay within these categories. At its best, teaching moves quickly and appropriately to talk that prioritises explicit teaching and learning. *Talk for teaching and learning* is visibly on task. This crucial aspect of effective teaching practice requires considerable self-awareness and reflectiveness on the teacher's part.

Effective talk for literacy teaching and learning is displayed when:

- the talk meaningfully orientates to learning about aspects of literacy
- students talk about their learning
- new learning is drawn from, and explicitly linked to, what students know
- students hear and understand the learning purposes and instructional processes
- literacy learning remains at the forefront of the talk at all instructional points throughout the lesson
- talk connects, challenges and sustains learning
- participants review the learning in a meaningful way.

Teaching and learning are *deliberate* endeavours. Just as we go about the business of planning and programming for teaching in a deliberate way — selecting particular tasks to meet curriculum and student needs, matching students to texts, planning and organising assessment — we need to be deliberate in our delivery. Classroom interactions therefore need to be clearly focused on learning. Then, talk about *other* things — themes, behaviour, organisation and so on — becomes incidental. Although incidental learning is often useful and not to be undervalued (particularly if it responds directly to the learning needs of students), it is ultimately *how the student hears and understands* the lesson expectations, the task and the instructional focus that will determine learning success.

Refocusing

Teachers use language as a fundamental pedagogical tool. Their language choices are significant in constructing meaning and knowledge. Well considered, these choices can enable students to learn to *use* literacy, learn *about* literacy and learn *what counts* as learning. It is through talk with peers and with teachers, after all, that students explore the world of literacy.

All corners of society recognise literacy learning to be a key outcome of classroom teaching. However, it is often not given a primary place in lessons. By examining their classroom literacy practice, the teachers in my study acknowledged that their explicit teaching was almost always directed to developing classroom participation skills. After examining their own lessons, these teachers agreed that providing students with focused introductions and instruction about the literacy goal had a flow-on effect for lesson outcomes. In particular, they found there was less need for management insertions and regulatory talk. Focused instruction promoted on-task behaviour and on-task talk.

All teachers shift between the categories of talk identified in this chapter. To be effective, teachers are called to engage in explicit, responsive teaching — a principled interactive process that is the focus of the next chapter — and to teach within a framework of focused lesson construction (the focus of Chapter 5).

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4

Assessment: Knowing and responding to the learner

We need to allow the students to talk about what they perceived to be the purposes of the assessment and how they thought they went, what was hard, and what was easy; this helps us get to know our kids better because we get a better idea of what they have learnt or need to learn next, what needs reteaching.

Year 4 teacher

Assessment cannot be separated from teaching and learning; it is a crucial component of any teaching and learning cycle. Assessment, then, must be viewed in interactive terms. Like other aspects of learning and teaching, assessment is a social event. Through the interactions encountered in and around assessment events, students learn about themselves and how they are progressing. Assessment is therefore an evolving aspect of classroom life.

Productive, on-task teaching occurs when teachers make visible connections between prior learning, student knowledge and experience, and new learning. Effective teachers meet students at their level, carrying them forward with relevant and authentic instruction both in their talk and in the tasks they design for their students. This is a feature of quality teaching referred to in this chapter as *authentic responsive teaching* (Dillon, 2000). Therefore there is a compelling need to gather data, even from the first day of the school year, that can assist teachers to build a complete picture of the learner — one that accounts for such things as culture, life circumstances, existing assessment information and previous learning experiences.

Responding to contemporary issues

Teachers design their programs against the backdrop of classroom society, with the focus clearly on addressing the diversity of student needs. Authentic classroom literacy programs require teaching to be customised to students' cultural contexts and learning needs while at the same time aligned to particular system needs. A main challenge for teachers, then, is to mesh students' learning needs with curriculum and system agendas. Furthermore, while teachers, in the main, do not take the value of assessment lightly, they may feel they are under pressure to 'fit in' assessment that is at once informative, time-efficient, relevant and classroom-based.

Responding to these challenges so that productive teaching and learning is not compromised is a key matter of concern for teachers. Within the complexities of classroom life, assessment is often taken to be an add-on — something that needs to be done but is a time-consuming extra rather than an essential part of teaching and learning. Assessment needs to be seen as an integral component of pedagogical practice, embedded within teaching and learning.

Alongside their deep understanding of curriculum, quality teachers interpret, analyse and utilise assessment information in a way that builds on students' current understandings. They extend and challenge students within a responsive, supportive relationship. The main concern of this chapter is the interconnectedness of teaching, learning and assessment, and their relationship to student–teacher interaction. Three broad dimensions of assessment are considered:

- Knowing the learner — starting with appropriate and relevant assessment
- The role of talk in assessment
- Responding to the learner — at points of need and in the design of the teaching program.

Knowing the learner

It is impossible to teach explicitly and productively if the teaching does not meet the literacy needs of the students. Teaching programs must be a genuine response to assessment information. Authentic responsive teaching acts on knowledge of the learner. Teachers need to know about students, and know what students can do, *before* they develop teaching programs. Crucially, they must account for difference by accommodating the individual needs of all students. Further, teachers need to learn

about students as learners: knowledge of *how students learn* enables teachers to provide more meaningful learning opportunities (Dillon, 2000).

Learning-centred assessment

With the assessment agenda in today's schools firmly focused on system and state/territory accountabilities, there is a need to place the learner at the centre of assessment purposes and processes. Assessment must directly affect teaching and learning. If we can truly say that assessment is primarily for teachers and learners to monitor progress and growth, we will have raised its status. This is not to undermine the role of external political and educational initiatives. It is simply a shift in emphasis towards building a culture of learning within the context of the school classroom that uses assessment information from a balanced range of instruments and processes.

Learning-centred assessment:

- *informs* the learner and the teacher of student progress and growth
- *directs* the instructional path
- *reflects* the teaching program.

To support student progress, assessment must have an impact on classroom teaching programs. Therefore, 'starting with assessment' is a key principle of effective pedagogical practice, and it is a concept taken up in many system initiatives. Teachers begin the year, the unit and the lesson with a period of assessment aimed at finding out how best to respond to students' learning needs. But trawling for 'information' about students is not enough. Assessment tasks must be conceived and analysed carefully, so that the resulting program responds to learners' existing knowledge and needs.

Critically, assessment needs to be *regular and ongoing*. It requires more than extracting a single piece of information about a student's performance. To be productive, assessment entails regularly drawing in information about what has been learned and what needs to be learned over time and from a multiplicity of sources (informal and formal, classroom-based and external). Single snapshots (such as state testing initiatives and other diagnostic measures) are most useful when they build onto an already evolving picture of student progress.

Good assessment practices feature timely and responsive interactions that provide pictures of progress which enable teachers to support individual students as they clarify concepts or develop process skills.

There is compelling evidence that classroom assessment tasks need to be *balanced and inclusive*. For example, the numbers of school-aged children in poverty, and/or with disabilities, and/or who have English as a second language, have increased significantly in everyday classrooms over the past two decades (van Kraayenoord, 2002). Heath (1983) suggests that the need to assess across a wide range of texts, tasks and settings is especially important for students from diverse backgrounds. Some students have trouble negotiating an assessment task because they bring a set of values, practices, understandings and resources that do not align neatly with 'mainstream' school culture. For example, students with limited English will require assessment that is designed to include their cultural and linguistic resources (Comber, 2000), while students with disabilities may require a variety of different accommodation strategies or even alternative assessments (van Kraayenoord, 2002).

Authentic assessment is about identifying learners' strengths and needs, including their home, community and cultural resources. Responsive teachers engage in a pedagogy that allows them to teach to the strengths, needs and abilities of students rather than to a predetermined set of activities or curriculum (Dillon, 2000).

Assessment is **regular and ongoing** when:

- it is taken to be an integrated concern
- it is embedded within everyday teaching and learning
- teachers monitor student performance in daily teaching and learning, and use their observations to inform further teaching directions
- some specific classroom tasks (rather than additional teacher-made tests) are selected as an appropriate, accurate assessment
- it incorporates daily lesson-review strategies that enable students to articulate their learning (see Chapter 5 for further detail)
- teachers observe and document students' progress and learning needs.

Assessment is **balanced and inclusive** when:

- it informs the learner, the teacher, the parent and the system of student progress and growth
- it comprises a range of measures for a range of purposes
- it draws on a wide range of texts, tasks and settings
- it incorporates a range of student groupings, formats and response modes (e.g. verbal; visual – concept map, graph, timeline; written – dictagloss, short/long answer, cloze, true/false/justify, yes/no, multiple choice/justify etc.)
- teachers develop a variety of different accommodation strategies, or even alternative assessments, for students with differing abilities
- students have opportunities to draw on a diverse range of cultural and linguistic resources
- students have opportunities to respond to assessment experiences in a way that truly reflects their personal growth
- it addresses the *literal* (here in the text), *inferential* (hidden in the text) and *applied* (in the head) levels of textual interpretation and response (CEC NSW, 2000)
- students must apply and transfer literacy knowledge and processes across a range of curriculum areas and problem-solving situations.

Assessment is **authentic** when:

- the focus of the assessment task is transparent — that is, the purposes of assessment are clearly set out for the learner in terms of rationale, process and product
- students know in advance what to look for, and focus on, in terms of understanding and application
- it is relevant to students; students need to connect the assessment both to their learning and to their life experience
- it is adjusted to be culturally and developmentally relevant
- it is planned
- it is based on outcomes and predetermined criteria that are made public to learners before the assessment event
- it assists the teacher to make valid and reliable judgements about the performance and progress of students
- it informs *and* reflects the teaching program
- it is the springboard for further focused teaching.

Designing responsive assessment tasks

Responsive assessment essentially involves teachers using information about the curriculum, their students and the teaching program in assessment design. It accommodates the literacy needs of all students by incorporating a range of strategies that give students multiple opportunities, in varying contexts, to demonstrate what they know, understand and can do in relation to identified outcomes (CEC NSW, 2000).

The following guide is useful for teachers who are aiming to construct responsive assessment tasks. It is appropriate for use across the curriculum.

Responsive assessment tasks: A checklist

Teachers need to decide on the:

- *purpose* of the task — the outcomes it will address, and how it aligns with the teaching program
- *type* of task — perhaps using Bloom's Taxonomy as a guide
- *mode* of the task response — e.g. oral, written, visual and/or gestural
- *form* of the response
- *language* of the task instructions — does it enable access for all students?
- literacy skills needed to *understand and complete* the task: how will the task be introduced to students, and in which context?
- literacy skills that need to be *reviewed and taught* prior to the commencement of the task
- appropriate *implementation time* of the task.

Source: Catholic Education Commission NSW (2000) 'Literacy Initiatives for Teachers in NSW Catholic Schools'. Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Canberra.

Whilst assessment must be manageable for the teacher, it must be equally manageable for and clearly understood by students. Effective assessment requires teachers to look at the literacy demands of each assessment task and consider whether students have a real opportunity to respond to, and complete, the task. When they identify the literacy demands of an assessment task, teachers have a valuable opportunity to reflect on the process skills that have been taught in the classroom. It is at this point that teachers may recognise a need for further explicit teaching about specific aspects of literacy.

The role of talk in classroom assessment

> **... being explicit is important from the point of engaging the learners in the whole of the learning process. In the same way you make the objective of a lesson clear, we need to be explicit about the purposes of the assessments we conduct in our classrooms. We need to tell the children what we are looking for and what they need to think about when completing any assessment tasks.**
>
> ***Year 2/3 teacher***

The way learners 'hear' the expectations of an assessment task is a crucial consideration that has important links to student performance. There needs to be a focus on transparency: students need to know the focus and the requirements of the task so they can respond in the full knowledge of *what* they are expected to show, and the *processes* required to show it.

This section shows the significant role that talk plays in classroom assessment. It demonstrates how teachers talk about assessment, and what students learn from assessment events. In looking closely at the interactions in and around classroom-based assessment, it is useful to ask:

- Does the talk help students to show what they really can do?
- What/Who does this assessment task enable?
- What/Who does it disable?

Transcript 4.1

Classroom context: Year 2/3 – classroom-based task to assess student knowledge about writing sentences

T: We're going to do story-writing today but, before we start, we're going to remember how to make a sentence, because I don't think you all remember how to do that, do you? So I'm going to find out what you can do, what you know about writing a sentence. I read someone's story that, um, didn't have any sentences last week, and it was quite a few lines long. Who can tell me what makes a sentence? (There are 23 further exchanges in the discussion.) **T:** Put your name up on the top, please — 'scuse me — put your name on top of the page and write me one sentence about a bear without talking to your neighbours.	The teacher sets the rationale for the assessment task here. After collecting students' ideas about what makes a sentence (largely criteria about full stops and capital letters), the teacher introduces the task: *Write one sentence about a bear.*

(There are 20 further exchanges.)

T: We need to make it more descriptive ...

(There are 18 further exchanges.)

T: Benny, come on ... okay, can you read me yours, um, Hannah?

Hannah: "A bear was very hungry."

T: A bear was very hungry.

Mike: Um, "Bears sleep all winter".

T: You write it down, please — don't you copy that, Byron.

Byron: I'm not.

S: How do you spell 'hungry'?

T: Hungry? Something like this. [*Writes 'hungry' on the board*] Come on, Kira, get to work. [*35 seconds elapse*] Okay, hands up who's done that. Now, yours.

Fiona: "The bear left a golden footprint."

T: The bear left a golden footprint. That's an interesting bear. Was it made of gold?

Fiona: Huh? Yeah.

T: It was, it was a magic bear. Um, Erin?

Erin: "The bear, the bear is fat and tall."

T: The bear is fat and tall. He must have had lots for dinner. Karena?

Karena: "The bear is very big."

T: The bear is very big. Damien?

Damien: "The bear ate six people in the afternoon."

T: I beg your pardon?

Damien: Um, "The bear ate six people in the afternoon".

T: No — make it something that makes sense, please. That is not sensible; a bear ate six people in an afternoon is definitely not what we are supposed to be doing, so can you make me another sentence with something sensible ... Lena?

Lena: "The bear was hungry."

It is not until turn 55 that the teacher adds another dimension to the task: *Make it more descriptive*.

At this point, we need to ask:

- How can the teacher be sure that all students heard the additional criterion?
- Who might the teacher lock out by not ensuring all students got the message? What does it enable the students to show?

The teacher drops in a request for 'sensible', yet 'imaginative' sentences. However, what either *descriptive* or *imaginative* means is not made clear, as reflected in some student responses.

T: The bear was hungry. Good. Just so that we can, you know, imagine — you know that word *imagine* — it's a good feeling when you can turn on your imagination and you can all see lots of good things. Benny?

Benny: "A bear ate a mosquito."

T: No — bears don't eat mosquitoes, I don't think. How 'bout "A bear ate ..."

Benny: A seal.

T: A seal?

Brian: A fish.

T: A fish; something like that.

(There are 21 further exchanges.)

T: The fish tasted — how would a fish taste?

S: Oh, I haven't tasted it. [*Laughs*]

T: You haven't tasted it? Well, how do you think it might taste?

S: Umm ...

T: Like, ah?

S: Carp.

T: Oh, yuk — that's yukky, yukky, yukky. I'd rather it tasted like a Murray cod.

S: Yeah, I caught a Murray cod.

T: Did you? Brian?

Brian: Do I copy that down?

T: No, I don't think so, darling — I don't think the two things go together. Try something else.

S: "A bear ate a fish. A bear ate two fish."

T: Next.

S: "The bear has a tummy ache."

T: A bear has a?

In the collection of student responses, there appears to be no clear pattern or predictability to the acceptability of student responses. Some students' sentences are deemed unacceptable, others are allowed, yet the reasons are not clearly compatible with the rationale or the added criterion. Damien's sentence "The bear ate six people in the afternoon" is not accepted because it is not 'sensible', yet "The bear goes to school" (offered later) is classified a clever bear, and the teacher rewards good imagination.

S: Tummy ache. **T:** Aah, aah — stomach ache; it ate too many fish, didn't it? Okay, good boy. [*Reading a student's work*] Your bear goes to school. What a clever bear. It must be an imagination bear, is it? **S:** It must be. **T:** Right, Tuolie. **Tuolie:** The bear ate a Murray cod. **T:** Try again, please — come on, bears don't come from Australia so they can't eat, don't eat Murray cods. (Later, Damien amends his sentence to "The bear is big".)	We must ponder whether Damien's eventual sentence, "The bear is big", reflects what he can do, or what he knows about writing sentences.

Examples like these provide a strong rationale for fixing the spotlight on the role of talk in classroom-based assessment. What is notable in this example is that the teacher talk acts as an impediment for students; it actually prevents students from meeting the requirements of the assessment task. For example, Damien's final contribution, "The bear is big", amended from "The bear ate six people in the afternoon", reveals nothing of the sophistication he is capable of. He could not show what he knows about writing a sentence, and indeed about using effective adverbial phrases, because of the teacher's inappropriate and limiting response. His performance was restricted to writing a simple sentence, and it was the talk of the teacher that cut off the display of learning from this student — and indeed other students. What does Damien learn about himself, and his progress?

Clearly, the teacher's responses to learners' contributions were not consistent. It is unclear what the teacher meant by 'descriptive' sentences and 'turning on your imagination', given the inconsistency with which responses are evaluated. We are left to wonder why "The bear left a golden footprint" was accepted as a satisfactory, 'sensible' description, yet "The bear ate six people in the afternoon" was not. (Indeed, this response seems, on the whole, more sensible than that describing the magical bear, if we accept *sensible* as an authentic assessment criterion.) So, because of a lack of clarity in the teacher's talk here, the achievement, or at least the demonstration, of particular curriculum outcomes was compromised.

Examples such as this can lead us to question how students gain access to the demands of a task. Instead of receiving a full explanation of the task and the associated criteria, students had to figure it out by themselves. They had to pull in evolving criteria as the assessment talk unfolded. This is particularly challenging for many students. As a matter of equity, teachers need to maintain particular vigilance about the way an assessment is set up in the talk. All students must hear the focal message from the outset, so that they can engage with the demands of the task with equal opportunity. And they need to be clear about the criteria they are required to satisfy because, as this example shows, judgement about student performance can be misrepresented or misinterpreted.

Talk, then, plays a key role in students' access to, and performance in, assessment tasks. If the talk does not set up the task equitably, the final product will not be an authentic indication of their performance and progress. Worse, analysing the students' products in these circumstances will not help the teacher to find out about the learner. What is needed is a close look at both the *process* (how the student came to a response) and the teacher–student *interaction* surrounding the assessment event. The interpretation of a student's performance may well shift when the talk itself is analysed.

So, in the interests of equity, of authenticity and of reliability, teachers must carefully monitor their talk and their responses to students within classroom assessments. If assessment is an ongoing concern throughout the lesson or unit of work, it needs to be clearly prioritised in the talk. The language of assessment significantly affects the way students perceive their growth and performance, and how the teacher judges success. Effective assessment talk, then:

- enhances students' opportunity to engage with the task
- aims for transparency; students know what is expected of them and why, and they know the processes for completing the task.

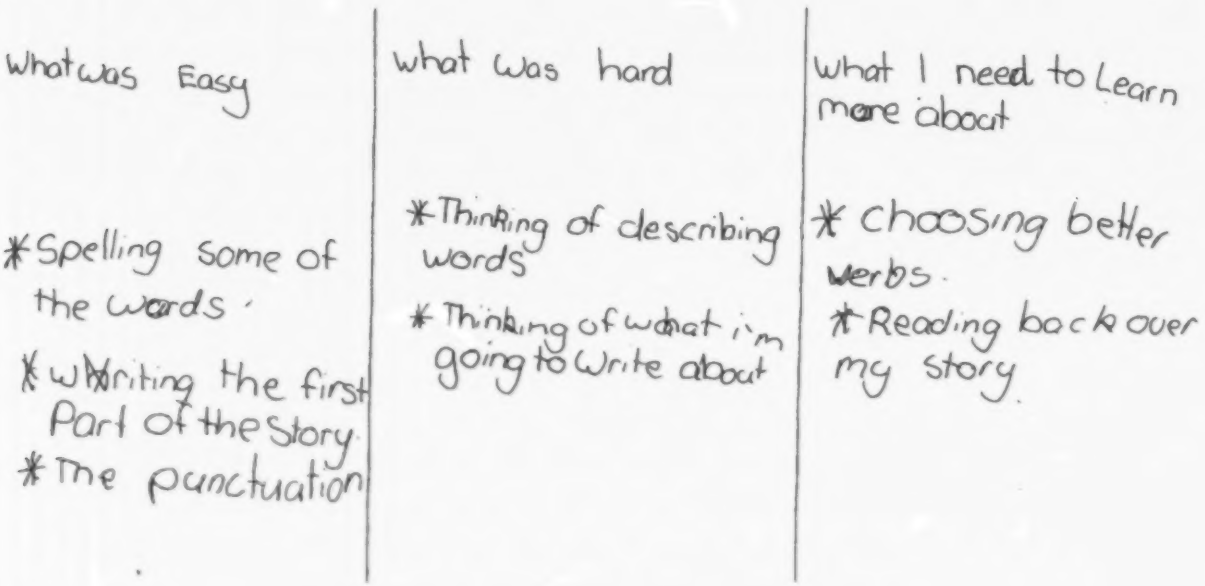
Talk as a pathway to assessment: An interactive review of classroom assessment tasks

> **... the review of the assessment task could be a time where you lead children through their own self-reflection about the task and the performance. I think it is just as important for children to reflect on the assessment focus, and their own progress ... they then can become evaluators of their own learning and progress.**
>
> ***Year 4 teacher***

Assessment can only be effective if the information collected is analysed, responded to and utilised. Reviewing assessment information with students is important on two levels:

- It helps students to monitor their own progress. Students recognise when assessment data are being used to improve their learning, and they attend to their learning in a responsive way.
- It provides the teacher with definitive information about student progress that can ultimately serve to refine and customise teaching. Teachers need to use assessment information 'on the spot', where it will affect learning. It is important to provide immediate feedback that may clarify a misconception.

Productive teachers use talk as a pathway to assessment — to find out about their students before teaching, during teaching and after teaching. Articulating learning is a key interactive assessment tool. It is essential to review any assessments with the students. Students need the opportunity to engage in focused talk about the assessment experience. *What did you show? How did you show it? What was easy? What was troublesome? What was tricky? What do you need to learn next? What would you do differently next time?*


Whatwas Easy
*Spelling some of the words.
*Writing the first Part of the Story.
*The punctuation
what was hard
*Thinking of describing words
*Thinking of what i'm going to write about
what I need to Learn more about
*choosing better verbs.
*Reading back over my story.

After reviewing a writing task within a small group, this student has documented the easy and hard parts of the task along with related future challenges.

It is also useful to revisit aspects of the assessment (or test) with students to explore the possible responses and to extend or challenge their thinking. This can be done individually, in groups or with the whole class. Focused reflection strategies — described in detail in Chapter 6 — also provide the opportunity for an interactive review of both classroom assessment and classroom teaching.

For the most part, teachers, within lessons, can form a clear picture of which students are progressing well and which require reteaching or follow-up. Focused classroom observations provide formative assessment of student learning. Assessment through ongoing monitoring and observation of student talk during classroom lessons also assists the responsive teacher to:

- provide all students with feedback on how well they are progressing
- respond contingently and directly to individual students
- provide supportive feedback that directly links to the learning focus
- keep students on task or help them to focus on key aspects of the task.

Authentic responsive instruction

> **Student responses can help us as teachers to clearly identify what was learnt and what needs reteaching by monitoring what students actually say about their learning ... It's a partnership in evaluation because we both know what was expected and together we can see how they well they demonstrate what they know, understand or learn. They will have a clearer picture in their own minds of the purpose and outcomes and can then go to Mum and say "This is what we were learning and this is how we did it" or "No, I didn't understand it very well". This would allow a great system of independent self-evaluation to grow, where the children can clearly articulate their own learning in relation to the stated purposes or outcomes.**
>
> ***Year 2/3/4 teacher***

Powerful teaching occurs when teachers respond both to assessment information and to student offerings within the classroom literacy lesson. Classroom interaction must be seen to build on students' responses. Dillon (2000) says that responsive interaction provides evidence to students that teachers value their input. This is a feature of quality education that builds strong classroom relationships, the foundation of productive and effective pedagogy. It is a feature demonstrated at points in the following transcript.

Transcript 4.2

Classroom context: Year 1 – guided reading groups using the text to focus on the 'ow' letter pattern

T: Well done. The very next word has a sound we've done a bit of practice on, 'o-w'. What does that make? Umm, Tamika?

Tamika: 'Ow'.

T: Good girl. So what's the word? Sound it out. Good. Aron. Aron, sound it out to yourself. Look carefully, Aron. What letter does it start with, everyone? Yes, Thomas?

Thomas: That word's 'howl', it's 'howl'.

T: Wow, you can do the whole word here; keep going now you noticed the first part of the word — I know you can do the next bit. Now, let's add on the 'e-d' ending to finish it off.

The teacher responds directly to Thomas' contribution. The teacher allows Thomas the opportunity to build on what he knows about word-reading.

Thomas: It's 'howled'.

T: You got it — 'howled'. Thanks for getting us this far, Tom. Okay, put your finger under it, everyone — and what does it start with, Tom?

Thomas: 'H'.

T: Well done. [*Reads on*] "...howled the wind and down the road came a pie." There's another word in that sentence that's got 'ow' in it. Who'd like to have a try? Okay, Mitch.

Mitch: Road?

T: Ooh, have a closer look at 'road', Mitch — it's got the letters 'o-a', which make the sound?

The teacher scaffolds Mitch's attempts to locate the 'ow' word.

Mitch: Oops. Ohh ...

T: That's right, the word we're after, the sound we're looking for, is the 'ow' sound, like in 'howled'. Find 'howled' again for me. [*Mitch points to 'howled'*] Good. Now, what do you notice about the letters?

Mitch: I got it — there. [*Points to 'down'*]

T: Fantastic. Everyone show me that one, 'down'. Well done, Mitch, you worked really hard then.

The talk of responsive teachers supports, or scaffolds, students when they are attempting tasks or responses that they are unable to complete on their own (Mercer, 1995). Responsive teachers also keep the learning goal in focus while they offer this support. They do more than make explicit connections between what is known and the intended outcomes; they directly seek clarification from their students by responding to what is said throughout the lesson to ensure that what students 'hear' and 'talk about' clearly relates to the learning intentions. A further example of this practice can be seen below.

Transcript 4.3

Classroom context: Year 4 – writing lesson using expressive verbs (a follow-up to author Jane Carroll's classroom visit)

T: Okay, all comfortable? Right, today we are going to be learning a bit more about how writers use interesting verbs to make their writing more expressive. We can learn to be better writers by really thinking hard about the words writers actually use in their stories. What did Jane call the interesting words she uses?	The teacher clearly points students' thinking towards the lesson focus, both in terms of procedure and process, and using both visual and verbal connections.
S: [*Together*] Fat words.	
T: That's exactly what she called them, beaut. They help to fatten the story. Okay, we will to listen to the beginning of this story called *Goose*, written by ...	
Malita: Jane Carroll.	
T: That's right. While we are listening, I want you to be thinking about the verbs Jane used to make the stories more interesting; you can jot any down if you, that helps. Now I'll write our 'think about, learn about' on the board so we can keep it in our brains while we are listening. Who can remind us? Okay, Tyler — what do you think?	
Tyler: We have to think about the interesting verbs she uses.	The teacher checks for understanding, ensuring all students have access to the task.
T: Good, I'll write it here. [*Writes on the board*] We'll just do small chunks at a time. The first chapter is called 'The Middle of Nowhere'. Right. [*Reads*] "Boo. The boy jerked. He turned his head and ..."	

(The teacher reads on.)

T: We'll stop there for a moment. How did you go? What were some of the words Jane chose in that first part? Okay, Simon?

Simon: 'Flopped'.

Jacob: I got 'plucked'.

T: Great words, 'flopped' and 'plucked'. Thanks for that, Jacob, I'll make a note of that so we can come back to it. But let's take 'flopped' first: what makes that an interesting word? [*Points to Tom*]

Jacob's contribution is clearly valued, and is taken up in a further interaction.

Tom: It's better than 'sat'; she could have said 'sat down'.

T: What makes it better, Tom? What do you mean? Tell us a bit more about what you think.

Tom: Well, um, you can imagine it better ...

Dylan: Making a better picture in your mind.

Dylan and Kate are allowed the opportunity to build on to Thomas' initial contribution.

T: You sure can. What do the rest of you think? How 'bout you, Maria?

Maria: Well, you get the idea that she, like, plonked, in a huff or something — she didn't sit down slowly or gently or anything ...

Anna is able to respond to and evaluate Maria's idea.

Anna: Yeah, that's what I was going to say, too.

T: I agree too, Anna. [*Background bidding*] What would you like to add about choosing 'flopped' instead of 'sat', um, Kate?

Kate: 'Sat' is an ordinary word; it ['flopped'] gives you a better picture in your mind.

T: I agree — it is a much more interesting verb. Let's write that one up on the note board, Mikala, as a reminder. Right, what about 'plucked'? I'll read that part again, so you can remember where it fits. Umm, "Goose plucked a dry stalk of grass". What do you think about using that word 'plucked'?

Throughout the lesson talk, the teacher is keeping the learning goal in focus.

A responsive teacher carefully listens to student contributions and acts on them appropriately. In the example above, the teacher demonstrates responsive teaching by enabling the students to respond to each other's ideas or offerings. Furthermore, effective teachers employ particular interactive techniques that can support and extend students as they construct understanding. Tom, above, is challenged to extend his initial response by further clarifying and building on his contribution. The transcript also demonstrates the way the teacher, along with the students, collaboratively constructs the concept of *interesting verbs*. By allowing students to piggy-back onto each other's ideas, the teacher has made it possible for students to share responsibility for their learning.

It is vital for teachers to use explicit yet responsive talk both in whole-class and in focused small-group teaching sessions. Interactive strategies such as *reciprocal teaching* (Palincsar & Brown, 1985) or utilising appropriate organisational group structures such as *guided reading* (seen in Transcript 4.2) provide the opportunity for teachers to respond genuinely to learner strengths and needs through appropriately focused instruction, prompting and questioning. These strategic interactive approaches are suitable for students across all cultural groups and developmental stages, and are particularly useful for small-group teaching.

Reciprocal teaching enables students to construct meaning with the aid of explicit teacher support in questioning, clarifying, generalising etc. Students' own understandings form the basis of the talk.

In reciprocal teaching, for example, students are provided with opportunities to construct the meaning of text through reading, talking and listening; they are not only encouraged to do most of the talking, but they are explicitly taught to generate meaningful questions and statements. The talk focuses on making explicit connections to all levels of text (visual, literal, semantic, functional and critical) through predicting, clarifying, questioning (both at literal and at inferential levels) and summarising. The teacher responds to student offerings in a way that focuses the talk on learning about specific aspects of literacy.

In summary, therefore, responsive teachers:

- act on assessment information
- genuinely value and respond directly to students' input
- support, or scaffold, students attempting tasks or responses that they are unable to complete on their own
- listen to and act on student contributions
- keep the learning goal in focus while utilising assessment (knowledge of the learner) and curriculum knowledge
- provide authentic opportunities for students to respond to each other's offerings
- allow students to piggy-back, or build onto, each other's ideas
- employ particular interactive techniques that support, challenge and extend students as they construct understanding (for example, adjusting student grouping structures to reflect particular learning needs).

Refocusing

This chapter has asked teachers to reconsider the role of talk in assessment. Assessment talk is crucial to learning success. It needs to:

- inform students of the purposes, processes and procedures of the assessment
- respond to students' diverse cultural and learning needs
- engender meaningful review and reflection.

A culture of learning calls for pedagogy to respond to learners' needs in a way that is visible in the talk, in the tasks and in the texts. Effective teachers build their teaching programs on the notion that meaningful teaching and learning primarily acts on knowledge of the learner. They know their students, they know about their students, and they respond genuinely both to students' learning needs and to their classroom contributions.

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5

On-task teaching and learning: A framework for focused teaching

Explicit teaching [using this framework] makes me more effective as a teacher. It definitely focuses me on what I am teaching and it gets me more focused on what I'm looking for in terms of students' learning outcomes. I know what I want the children to learn, the processes required and when they get there, and it doesn't matter what topic or text you use to teach the skill. This undoubtedly makes the learning more meaningful for the children I teach.

Year 2/3 teacher

"What did you learn at school today?" This timeless greeting reflects a parent's desire to share in their children's newly developed insights and knowledge. It often aims to stimulate an enthusiastic 'family' discussion, in which the parent becomes positively and actively involved in their child's learning. But the typical responses to this query — half-hearted shrugs and vague replies — are not encouraging.

Why is this scenario typical? We know our children must be learning *something*. Perhaps our students haven't clearly heard and understood the learning processes or outcomes.

Perhaps they haven't had the opportunity to reformulate or articulate what learning has taken place in their own language, as true partners in their own learning.

This chapter presents a principled framework for instruction. It offers teachers an approach that reconnects the learner with the learning, and the teacher with the teaching. It leads teachers to consider the importance of structuring learning events and patterns of classroom interaction. It might even mean that students have something to say the next time they are greeted by their inquiring parent.

Creating a climate of effective teaching and learning

Effective teachers recognise that they shape the climate of the classroom. Teachers want students to learn within an environment that positively enables them to achieve their full learning potential. There is no panacea or simple strategy that will create an optimum climate. But, as we have seen, teachers can only create meaningful, learning-centred experiences when they are clear about what it is they want students to learn. What the students are learning — what they are thinking about — is more important than the strategies or activities used.

Effective teachers bring into the classroom a secure and extensive knowledge of curriculum content and standards. Their purposes reflect these macro aspects of learning, ensuring that their teaching strategies are aligned with learning goals. And they do not lose sight of these learning goals in their talk.

A climate of learning requires the seamless integration of micro and macro features of teaching. It involves implementing the teaching of literacy processes and content while at the same time foregrounding the utility and the relevance of such knowledge and skills in real-life contexts. This all requires detailed attention to teacher *talk*, to lesson *structure* and to use of *materials* (Anstey, 1998). According to Anstey (ibid.), changing just one of these features may not necessarily achieve the objective of explicit and productive teaching. So, what is required is for interactions to become effectively embedded within a *system of explicit instruction*, a system that is best guided by the framework presented later in this chapter.

With all this talk of structure and frameworks, however, it is reasonable to ask: where is the fun and enjoyment in learning? It must be said here that the framework outlined in

this chapter aims to guide the interactive dimension of teaching, not to lay down limits. There is ample room for building into lessons the essential characteristics of motivation and stimulation that lure students to the learning table. The framework is not to be taken as a clinical, teacher-directed approach but one that revitalises and frees teachers to be creative while *focused on learning*.

A framework for focused literacy instruction

> **In using this model I have a better sense of my starting points for teaching — what children already know, where they are going and when they achieve. The difference is I know about their learning. I can map their learning path in a more systematic, and I think educationally sound, way. You are empowering kids to be good learners by allowing them to take on the role of monitoring the progression of the lesson in relation to the initial focus and knowing learning outcomes through the review. They will understand the whole idea of the learning task a lot better. It is not going to be an authoritarian approach but you do get a lot further with the children as they are taking more responsibility for achieving the outcomes.**
>
> ***Year 2/3/4 teacher***

The framework for teaching and learning presented hereunder extends the view that explicit teaching involves, basically, 'telling the students the lesson purpose'. The very task of stating the concepts, skills or knowledge students should learn helps the teacher make explicit, first to themselves and then to the students, the essential concepts of the topic and the processes for learning. But explicit teaching ranges much more widely than that. As we have seen, it is, just as importantly, about the talk that *organises students for learning and manages resources* within the learning context. Effective teaching requires teachers to recognise the impact of classroom interactions on learning while addressing the full range of literacies and relevant learning experiences. It is also about managing time, maintaining relevance and keeping on track.

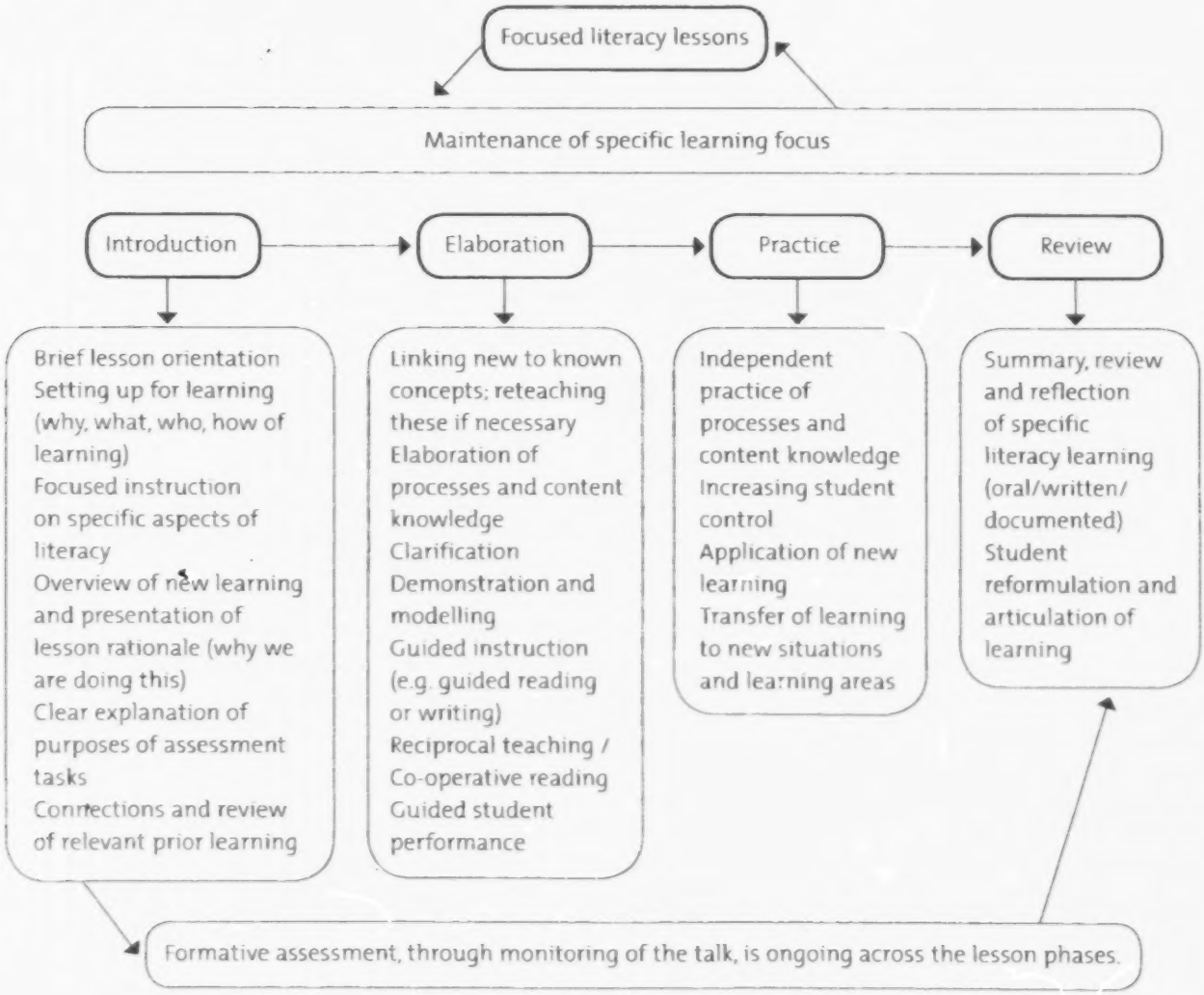
> **I've become aware of what I am actually teaching the children. I am much more explicit about exactly what I want the children to learn and, in the presentation of the purpose of particular lessons, remembering to review what has been done in the lesson or the unit and trying not to just pack up and go on to the next thing, and therefore I am more aware of my time management.**
>
> ***Year 2/3 teacher***

I've found explicit teaching using the framework gets the job done quicker; you don't need to spend as long getting down to the focus, or the particular skill you are trying to teach the children, because the focus is so clearcut and it's not confused by other conversation that happens. Children remember the focus better and so you seem to be able to move on easier.

Year 2/3/4 teacher

So, what does this look like in practice? The following framework (initially presented in Edwards-Groves, 1999), like any instruction cycle, provides teachers with a guide to structuring lessons so that the literacy learning purposes are clear, direct and progressively presented. Each element of the framework may be weighted (allocated more or less time) according to the instructional purposes.

Figure 5.1: A framework for focused literacy instruction


Focused literacy lessons
Maintenance of specific learning focus
Introduction
Elaboration
Practice
Review
Brief lesson orientation
Setting up for learning (why, what, who, how of learning)
Focused instruction on specific aspects of literacy
Overview of new learning and presentation of lesson rationale (why we are doing this)
Clear explanation of purposes of assessment tasks
Connections and review of relevant prior learning
Linking new to known concepts; reteaching these if necessary
Elaboration of processes and content knowledge
Clarification
Demonstration and modelling
Guided instruction (e.g. guided reading or writing)
Reciprocal teaching / Co-operative reading
Guided student performance
Independent practice of processes and content knowledge
Increasing student control
Application of new learning
Transfer of learning to new situations and learning areas
Summary, review and reflection of specific literacy learning (oral/written/ documented)
Student reformulation and articulation of learning
Formative assessment, through monitoring of the talk, is ongoing across the lesson phases.

Note that the framework focuses on the flow of interactions within the lesson — what follows what, and how it relates to what has been said or done before. A key feature is that it recognises talk as a vehicle for monitoring student learning at all instructional points across the lesson.

1. INTRODUCTION

Purpose: Presents new skills and concepts. Provides a brief orientation to the lesson purposes, with explicit connections to previous learning/experiences. Communicates what is expected of students, and why.

An introductory orientation to learning is essential to ensure that students' thinking is focused on learning. Here is an opportunity for students to define what they know, to initiate discussion, to explore their thinking, and to know what is relevant to the new learning. It develops and enhances *concepts* of literacy, not just skills. Here, teachers set the stage for learning by communicating learning procedures and processes, and by clarifying expectations for student performance.

Implications for teaching

Purposeful and stimulating introductions to literacy lessons should incorporate the presentation of the lesson rationale, structure and content focus. Lesson introductions need to be orientated to specific literacy learning. They also need to be crisp, stimulating and motivating, catching students' attention and desire to learn. Productive lesson beginnings involve *instructional* talk, rather than conversational talk. Meaningful introductions provide clarity about:

- the **context** for learning and thinking. Teachers should provide oral and visual cues that can act as prompts throughout the lesson. For example, a 'think about / learn about' cue on the board can remind students of the lesson focus. Sticky notes — carrying the specific learning focus and posted on particular students' desks — are also useful for promoting on-task thinking and on-task behaviour
- the lesson **rationale** — why students are engaging in this learning at this time
- the lesson **outcomes** — what students will know, and be able to accomplish, at the end of the learning episode/s. There is a clear statement of lesson goals
- the lesson **content** — what students will be learning about. There is a series of engagements about the components that make up, or lead to, the lesson outcomes

- the lesson **routines and processes** — how students will learn. Students get the full picture. They understand the processes and procedures for doing the task. Teachers establish and clarify the organisational routines required, considering what social groupings are necessary
- **what is known**. There are brief but explicit connections with relevant prior learning. Teachers explore the question: "What do you already know?". Reviews of learning experiences are briefly incorporated into the lesson structure and woven into orientations to what needs to be learned. The teaching must allow students to draw from previous learning tasks and experiences. It must establish the process skills and conceptual understandings that are prerequisite to new learning. This check for understanding will determine if reteaching is necessary (see, for example, Transcript 5.2)
- the required **resources**. They establish the materials (e.g. texts, technologies, human resources) that will be required to achieve the targeted literacy outcomes
- the **procedural mechanics** for the talking/listening, reading/interpreting or writing/representing task (e.g. orthographics and formatting).

Some sample introductions follow.

Transcript 5.1

Classroom context: K/1/2 – reading, using indexes and tables of contents in information texts

T: In our lesson today we will be looking closely at the way this type of book is set up. First, who would like to make a prediction about what type of book this is? **Cassie:** Report. **T:** What do you know about a report, Cassie? **Cassie:** They have real things on the front cover, like animals ... **Luke:** It's a narrative. **T:** Okay, Luke, what do you know about narratives and how they are set up? **Luke:** A report has photos on the front cover and this has illustrations.	The teacher begins by orienting the students to the purpose of the lesson explicitly. The topic of the book is not taken up as the primary concern.

T: Usually, but not always. Today we are learning more about how information books are set up, and the parts of information books. I want you to scan through your book, like we did yesterday. Look at the pictures and the set-up. What do you notice? **S:** [*Together*] Photos/Index/Pictures ... **T:** Okay, we've had some time to scan through: what did you find out? **S:** An index. **T:** Show us, how might a reader use an index?	

Transcript 5.2

Classroom context: Year 1/2 – writing, learning about the structure of recounts

T: Today we will be looking at recounts again. Write in your 'think book' three things you already know about recounts, then we'll share them with our learning buddy.	The teacher begins by orienting the students explicitly to the purpose of the lesson, making connections between new and known using a 'think, pair, share' strategy.

2. Elaboration

Purpose: Works towards 'getting the idea'. Captures and records relevant ideas and new language. Draws on experience and language to explore ideas, processes, knowledge or concepts. Uses models and demonstrations that support the intended literacy content and processes.

Demonstrations and explorations of new processes and concepts help to maintain the focus of learning that has been introduced. This phase of learning draws directly from the lesson introduction. Care must be taken not to take up incidental, 'on the run' tangents of talk. This phase can often follow a whole–group–whole structure.

Implications for teaching

Lesson elaborations provide a link between lesson phases. Together, teachers and students clarify how *this* relates to *that*. Teachers must construct a series of tasks that show real-life applications of the intended accomplishment, and which foreshadow the tasks that students will practise.

Meaningful elaborations:

- build onto known concepts, knowledge and process skills, adding more detail and expanding on the initial learning content and purposes
- offer reference points (e.g. "Remember when ..."). They provide clear mental images, often called 'brain pictures' (Redden, 1991) that can be called on at a later time. This is critical when students experience a new concept or process for the first time
- present facets of new learning in a range of ways, e.g. illustrations, examples, teacher modelling. There are purposeful demonstrations of content and processes through a range of interactive mechanisms or strategies, so that students can say "I can do it"
- recognise students' social context outside the classroom in the selection of content and resources, drawing on materials that resemble those found in a variety of real-life situations
- employ a range of student grouping arrangements that respond to learners' needs and reflect a variety of learning purposes
- systematically address the four literacy resources or practices (Freebody & Luke, 2002)
- capture ideas explicitly. They record and organise learning in a range of ways (pictures, charts, tables, summaries, statements etc.). Students are asked to write about, draw and/or explain their ideas, understandings and/or beliefs
- refine learning through statements reflecting what is newly accomplished using appropriate and new language.

Transcript 5.3 is an example of a lesson where learning is compromised because lesson phases are not clearly linked and teacher responses are not consistently related to the nominated lesson outcomes.

Transcript 5.3

Classroom context: Year2/3 – reading groups

(In the preceding interactions, students have read out acrostic poems that use their own names as the base word.)

T: That's not a word. [*Two minutes of chatter. Clapping*] Okay, okay, come on. Please sit down; that's enough of that, I think. I want you to think about what we might do next time; we might do something that's a bit like a snake, which'll be 's–s' and we will have to say everything that starts with?

S: [*Chorusing*] 'S'.

T: And we can do a quick practice run before we finish up. [*Chatter*] Ahh, did you hear what I said, Gemma? What did I say?

Gemma: Next time, ah, next time we'll do, um, our middle name.

T: Pardon?

Gemma: Next time we'll do our middle name.

T: No. [*Points to Shane for a response*]

Shane: Um, next time we are going to do esses.

T: Well, um, we'll do one now, so that we can think about it and next time we come back to doing it we'll have it all well sorted out, and you might want to do, um, ah, 'sh' words or 'gr' words. [*Chatter*] Okay, guys, hands up. [*Points randomly around the room*]

S: Sausage.

T: No — describing words, thanks.

(In the next 25 turns, the teacher receives and responds to further 's' offerings from students, among them 'snake' and 'skate'.)

S: Slippery.

The teacher has begun by calling for students to read out their acrostic poems from a previous lesson. Turn 125 signals a phase change (clapping and stating "that's enough of that"). A collection of 's' words is nominated as the next activity. It is not until turn 135 that the teacher adds a new component to the task — the words are to be 'describing' words. Gemma does not hear the new task.

T: Right — slippery slide. Amy?

Amy: Sky.

T: No.

S: Um, sport.

T: No.

S: Sport.

T: No.

S: Spiky.

T: No.

S: Slop.

T: Okay, we're running out of words and you're not putting anything in that is a describing word. Now I'll read them out. We've got: snake, silly, stupid, sloppy, skate, scary, slinky, scaly. So, when, ah, we decide to do something else, we will have the words ready for the next time. I would like Laurel and Leanne to collect the books — please, please don't wreck your books, and get out your reader and your worksheets, please — and this is not going to be a big party, Gray, please. [*Chatter continues for several minutes while students get out books*] Ah, hands on heads, guys — listen to me. Um, excuse me, can you listen to Cam's story from this morning? Please! Without talking, please! "The strange ship. One day I was at the beach and I saw a strange ship. It came in closer and closer and it stopped as it put out its anchor, there, were ..." Um, I think you had better have a look at this and then we'll come back and read it again. Yes sir?

S: I can't find my book.

T: Your red book. Have you looked in the pile?

Interestingly, some of the accepted words are not describing words at all ('snake', 'skate'), and some describing words are not accepted (e.g. 'spiky'), compromising any new learning about describing words. Some students show in their talk that they do not know about describing words, but no clarification is offered by the teacher.

The phases leading up to the completion of reading activity sheets do not appear to be linked to the reading at all.

Further disrupting lesson cohesion is the incidental insertion of Cam's story, which the teacher begins to read out.

The main concern — working in reading groups — does not receive clear space in the lesson for 23 minutes.

3. Practice

Purpose: Keeps the learning goal in view. Maintains the literacy focus as the primary topic of talk and task, thinking and activity. Assists students to work towards independence and portable capabilities.

Without practice, consolidated learning is limited — perhaps impossible. This phase allows for fluent performance and assimilation of new processes and concepts. It provides an opportunity for students to enter into some sustained performance that moves them towards the literacy-learning goal. The performance must link directly to the learning focus established in the introduction and must engage students in relevant and purposeful activity, generating products and processes that are recognisably similar to those that have been modelled and demonstrated in the elaboration phase.

This is students' opportunity to engage in tasks that enable them to extend their learning and take more control. They have a chance to apply newly formed understandings to authentic learning tasks. They may be called on to propose tasks for themselves that require them to use their learning in complex, real-life situations — investigating, solving problems, discriminating and synthesising, and presenting information in a range of self-selected ways.

Implications for teaching

Students at this phase are supported by timely teacher intervention, such as explicit individual, group or whole-class instruction. However, the teacher aims to withdraw direct assistance as students gain independent control over the performance requirements.

Meaningful practice:

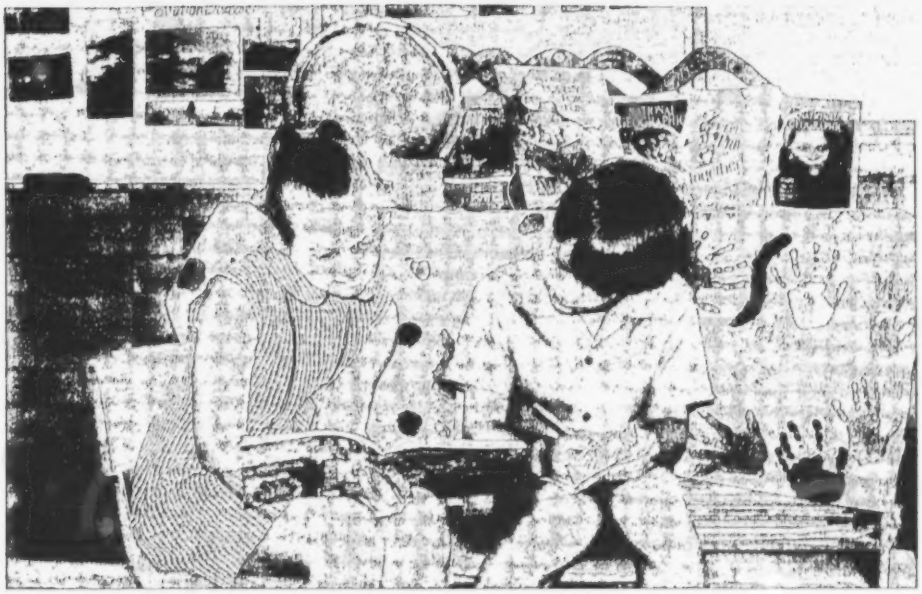
- allocates time to tasks and activities that enrich, clarify, extend and apply the focus content
- allows for fluency and assimilation of new knowledge, skills and concepts
- consists of tasks that are recursive and overlapping (Education Queensland, 2000), in which the learning focus is repeated in a range of ways
- calls on higher-order thinking skills, adaptation and transfer of understandings, strategies or processes to facilitate self-monitoring and self-direction. For example, it enables students to communicate ideas and knowledge in a range of ways (e.g. *PowerPoint* or *HyperStudio* presentations, posters, speeches, drama), teach others, and apply and demonstrate metacognitive strategies, including asking questions such as: *Where have I seen this before? What did I do last time? What do I know that can help?*

- is supported by guided teacher instruction that helps students to organise new learning. Guided teacher instruction focuses on the rehearsal, use, transference and consolidation of specific knowledge and process skills, requiring consistent teacher nomination and confirmation of successful learning. Guided instruction is particularly valuable in supporting students to analyse and critique texts within small groups. It includes quality teacher questioning, correction of errors as they occur, authentic feedback related to what is being learnt (more than mere 'good' statements), working-through of multiple examples and responses, and reteaching if necessary
- orientates students with clear instructions and sufficient practice before they attempt independent work, using suitable grouping arrangements
- places an emphasis on quality
- moves students towards independent control. Learning becomes portable and transferable. Students can say "I know how to do it and when to use it".

4. Review

Purpose: Supports the systematic, cumulative consideration of learned material. Offers a sense of completion and satisfaction to learning experiences through retrospective thinking. Offers a sense of progress through prospective thinking. Enables a focus on the learning (What did I find out / learn to do?) and the learner (How did I go?).

Hearing and articulating learning experiences enables students to connect new learning with known concepts or skills by interpreting specific learning experiences and information. In this phase, students learn from the learning experience and understand its relevance in the everyday world. They engage in focused reflection on, and articulation of, new accomplishments. Students *and* teachers know where the next step in the learning will be. A range of grouping structures (individual, paired, small-group, whole-class) and reflective strategies may be used.



An interactive review of learning can be supported by such practices as 'think, pair, share'.

Implications for teaching

While the time allocated to focused review may not be as great as that allocated to practice, it is not an optional part of the framework. It is essential. Teachers need to make time to revisit specific literacy learning. Teachers support meaningful review when they:

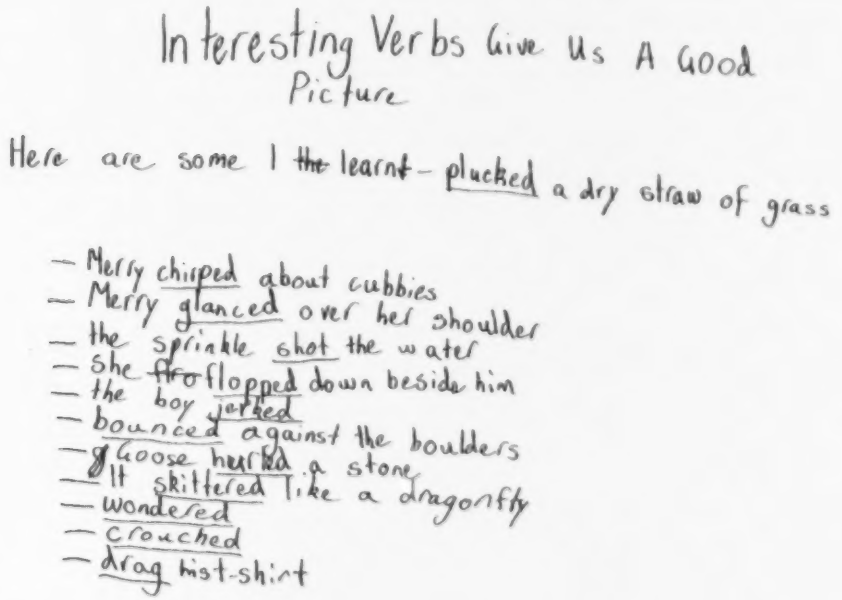
- signal a change of lesson and/or lesson phase to the students
- incorporate a daily reflection and summary element into the lesson structure, calling for students to think over and articulate the learning agenda. This element might be used on a lesson-by-lesson basis and as a part of a daily and/or weekly review
- provide students with opportunities to correct errors and modify approximations
- encourage student self-evaluations and monitor students' progress towards accomplishment, looking for signals that will indicate if reteaching or redirection is necessary
- use a range of interactive reflection and review strategies (presented in more detail in the next chapter). For example, learning logs or 'think books' can be used to record summary points
- maintain specific links with the purpose set out in the lesson introduction
- synthesise what is known with newly learnt or practised knowledge, processes or concepts.

The transcript extract below provides an example of a classroom interaction that goes beyond familiar lesson conclusions such as "Okay, pack up". See also Transcript 2.10 (p 30).

Transcript 5.4

Classroom context: Year 4 – using words that make writing more interesting

T: Right, let's work out where we are up to with our thinking when we are making our writing more interesting for the reader. We learnt about writing 'fat' words to make our writing more interesting. With your study buddy, I would like you to list three things — or more if you have time — you know, about making your writing more interesting. [*Pause*] Has everyone got that — know what your task is? Okay, you have about two minutes before we come back to the group to share your note. [*Pause*] Questions? **S:** Mrs C, can we write some of the words we used? Some of the 'fat' words? **T:** What a great idea. Did you all hear that? Can you repeat it for everyone to hear? [*Student repeats the question*] Yes, you might like to add some examples, too.	The teacher focuses the talk on what was learnt. The talk clearly relates to the main point of the lesson: learning about making writing interesting. Students clearly take up this focus in their contributions. In responding to the student question, the teacher values the learner as a partner in the lesson who has rights to negotiating and refining the task.



Interesting Verbs Give Us A Good Picture

Here are some I ~~the~~ learnt – plucked a dry straw of grass

– Merry chirped about cubbies
– Merry glanced over her shoulder
– the sprinkle shot the water
– She ~~fro~~flopped down beside him
– the boy jerked
– bounced against the boulders
– Goose hurled a stone
– It skittered like a dragonfly
– wondered
– crouched
– drag mist-shirt

This student has reviewed learning about expressive verbs in a 'think book'.

Using the framework [for explicit teaching], I am clear of the purpose of each lesson, from the planning stage to the presentation — remembering to review what has been done in the lesson or the unit of work, and trying not to just pack up and go on to the next thing.

Year 2/3/4 teacher

Refocusing

When classroom learning occurs within a clear organisational context, students sense a measure of control over their learning — a critical feature of building an effective learning community. Within a learning community, responsive teachers can generate an active, progressive and sequential program of instruction if they help students gain a sense of purpose in what they are talking, listening, reading and writing *for* and *about*. Foremost in classrooms, therefore, it is the teacher's responsibility to enable students to make sense of the literacy learning by connecting it to the world around them, to the lesson purposes, tasks and texts, and to the lesson reviews or conclusions.

The framework of instruction presented in this chapter provides teachers and students with a sequence that engages student thinking and activity directly on focused, on-task learning. It challenges teachers to keep the lesson structure in their minds as the lesson unfolds, calling for them to incorporate *each element* of the framework into *each lesson*.

This kind of reflective self-awareness does not come naturally — or easily, at first — within the rapidly evolving dynamics of the classroom. But teachers spend too little time on considered self-reflection and evaluation, and offer too little time for reviews of student learning. Some ways to support this kind of on-task thinking are presented in the next chapter.

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6

On-task thinking: Reflective teaching and learning

If we don't reflect, we are teaching 'in the dark' without knowing if we are being effective and if we should modify our teaching.
(Friel, 1997)

In a reflective learning community, teachers and students think about their teaching and learning regularly, critically and systematically. To learn explicitly, students must have opportunities to articulate and reflect on their learning, otherwise they may never know if they have made the right connections or achieved the intended outcomes. To teach explicitly, teachers must understand the role of reflection in effective pedagogy. Of course, all teachers reflect on, or think about, their lessons from time to time. But truly reflective practitioners not only ask questions routinely and deliberately, they use the answers to their questions to challenge, guide and change their instructional practices in a focused way — a feature of the professional-development approach taken up in the next chapter.

While reflection — stopping to think about, write about, question and test one's assumptions, actions and experiences — may be central to effective teaching, it is not an activity that "just happens" (Dillon, 2000). It needs to be planned for and taught. Reflection is a learned practice that is most effective when it is practised over time and in a range of ways. Productive, on-task teaching visibly connects teachers and students

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with learning through focused self-reflection and evaluation in a deliberate and conscious way. Broadly, this entails:

- reflecting on teaching — monitoring and evaluating teacher and student talk
- reflecting on learning — allowing time for student reflection and review.

Reflecting on teaching

All teachers, at different times and in different ways, reflect on their teaching. But this does not make every teacher a 'reflective teacher'. Reflection is not profitable unless it affects practice. Reflective teachers engage in collegial discussions about their reflections. They develop the ability to describe their actions and interactions, or to write about their teaching in a focused and analytic way. They want to interpret and learn from their own teaching. To do this, they plan opportunities for purposeful and relevant self-evaluation and dialogue.

Why reflect on practice?

Purposeful reflection helps teachers to:

- think through actions and classroom routines
- re-examine the appropriateness of the lesson talk, text and task
- evaluate classroom interactive practices
- evaluate student learning
- connect theory and practice
- examine their own teaching expertise
- change practice.

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What might need attention?

Reflective practices are vital for teachers because it might well be the case that:

- students are not hearing and/or understanding the intended learning processes or outcomes
- students are not being offered opportunities or sufficient practice in reformulating, and articulating in their own language, what learning has taken place
- teacher monitoring and reflection is not sufficiently attentive or ongoing to enable the teacher to adjust the teaching focus to meet students' current needs
- reteaching is necessary — perhaps the teacher mistakenly believes that students already understand certain concepts or processes
- the teacher does not fully anticipate the complexity of the concept being developed when planning.

The following strategies, adapted from Friel (1997) and Edwards-Groves (1998), can help teachers to reflect on the interactions and teaching practices within their lessons. The implementation of these strategies as focused professional development is described in more detail in the next chapter.

Reflective practice: Illuminating teaching and learning

The following reflective practices provide a collection of suggested approaches that teachers may find useful for shedding light on their practice. To fine-tune their current practice, teachers should select those strategies that suit their circumstances. Each strategy should lead to deliberate, authentic action.

Teach and look back

Take time to ask yourself questions about your lessons. What worked? What didn't? What would you do differently next time? What will you try tomorrow? Did you do a better job on the aspect that you are trying to improve (e.g. remembering to incorporate meaningful review, allowing wait time, calling on students to articulate their learning, asking students for justification or clarification)? Did you allow the students to build onto each other's ideas?

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Video-tape or audio-tape lessons

Video- or audio-taping their own lessons can provide teachers with sometimes startling insights into their practice. Some teachers will say "Oh, I could never do that!", but this book is here to say "Yes you can!". Once you get past the way you look and the way you sound, tapes offer rich information about your teaching practices. In particular, they reveal what your students hear to be the focal point of the lesson — how they talk about and think about their learning. They show aspects of teaching that cannot be gauged simply by recalling the lesson. They take the focus of teacher reflection to a new level — one that is expanded upon in the next chapter.

Write logs

Focused writing is a powerful tool for reflective learning. By keeping a daily/weekly reflection log or diary, you can learn a great deal about yourself as a teacher, and about student learning processes. Learning logs help teachers to focus on themselves as learners. They are equally beneficial for students (see the next section). Further, writing helps teachers to discover gaps in their thinking (Dillon, 2000).

Ask peers to observe and reflect

One of the best resources available to a teacher is another teacher — a colleague from your own school, a teacher from a learning network, a consultant or other professional peer. Be focused in the observation and debriefing. Identify a particular aspect of your teaching on which you would like the colleague to concentrate. For example, you may be trying to improve your lesson review, or reduce the fragmentation of learning by reducing incidental talk, or add depth to your questioning by including more open-ended questions, or develop consistency in your use of wait time. In any event, it is critical that the observation session is followed by a debriefing session that allows you and your colleague to share perceptions and evaluations of the lesson in relation to the focus (Friel, 1997). Don't try to focus on everything at once: be kind to yourself and choose one main category at a time for change or refinement.

Observe other teachers

Arrange to observe a willing colleague who is known to be an effective teacher. Think about the attributes you are trying to improve and focus your observations on these. Watch for the things that are working well. How is the teacher organising the students for learning? What grouping structures are in place? What can you take back to your classroom to try tomorrow? Allow time after the observation for debriefing in a focused reflection and discussion session.

The questions below are provided to guide focused teacher reflection. It is not necessary to address every question. Rather, teachers should add or adapt questions to meet individual purposes.

Teacher self-reflection questions

Ask yourself: What counts in my lessons? Do I accomplish what I set out to teach? How do I know? Is it evident in the talk of the classroom?

Teaching

Am I using the framework for focused literacy instruction (Chapter 5) to guide my lessons?

Do I use assessment information to guide my practice? Do I plan learning opportunities that have clear and well-defined purposes?

How do I introduce the main learning goals of the lesson? Is the new learning made explicit? Do I share the specific nature of the learning task, along with its rationale, its value to students' learning and its relevance to their lives?

Does the talk ensure that students are aware of what it is they will be expected to demonstrate to show achievement of the task?

Is the literacy learning focus maintained throughout the lesson?

Does my talk respond authentically to students' learning needs in a way that supports and extends their learning?

Do I scaffold the learner by demonstrating and modelling new processes, concepts and knowledge?

Do I provide explicit feedback that links students' responses and performance to the lesson goals?

Do I allow time at the lesson conclusion to reconnect students to their learning — that is, to reflect on, reformulate or articulate their learning?

What 'take-home messages' are students left with as a result of this lesson?

Am I allowing lesson time for purposeful reflection and review?

Am I using *wait time* before and after I receive responses to questions?

Am I exploring alternative strategies and ideas posed by different students?

Am I encouraging productive thinking and on-task talk?

Do I do most of the talking?

Students' talk

What do my students talk about?

What kinds of questions are my students asking?

Are my students talking with each other — challenging, justifying, debating?

Are my students listening to each other?

Are my students willing to take risks?

Are my students taking time to think about the problem, question, idea?

Can my students build onto each other's ideas?

Are my students able to explain their ideas clearly and precisely?

Are my students able to reflect on their learning and identify: what was hard? what was easy? what worked? what didn't? what they liked? what they didn't like?

Tools for learning

Am I making appropriate use of technology? For a range of purposes?

Do I encourage the use of various tools, modes and forms to represent and communicate ideas?

Is a range of texts used for a wide range of purposes? For stimulus and models? For interest and learning?

The learning environment

Is the physical environment arranged to facilitate discussion?

Is the environment stimulating and interesting?

Is the environment continually changing to reflect current learning?

Are students encouraged to show respect for, listen to and respond to other students?

Adapted from Edwards-Groves, 1999 and Friel, 1997.

Teacher reflection stands at the corner between theory and practice. It illuminates the details of practice in the minute-by-minute unfolding of a lesson. By examining their interactive practices critically, teachers can ask: Am I doing what I say I am doing, or what I say I believe about teaching and learning? Reflective teachers are genuine learners. They constantly learn from, and respond to, new situations and experiences. Reflective practice makes teachers responsive problem solvers who are constantly adjusting and refining their practice according to situation, subject and student group.

Reflecting on learning

How does reflection lead to learning? It is vital for students to reflect on, and to make public, both the content (what and why) and the processes (how) of learning. The cognitive behaviours generated by particular reflection strategies connect students to lesson purposes. It follows then, that students should not only be given the opportunity to reflect actively on their learning, but need to be taught the skills for doing so. A real measure of success is when students act as independent learners by engaging in their learning and then reflecting on that learning without reservation. Successful learners can articulate and transfer their learning across learning areas, bringing appropriate literacy knowledge from one learning situation to bear on another.

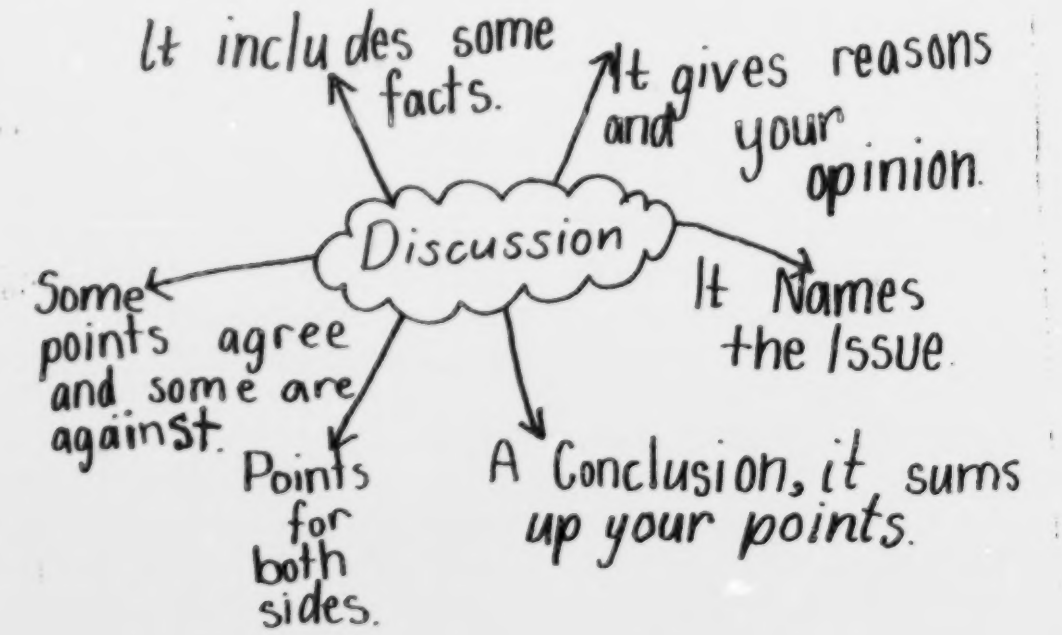
Purposeful reflection enables students to connect to learning in order to:

- O comprehend
- O articulate
- O assess
- O synthesise
- O summarise
- O integrate
- O transfer
- O consolidate
- O monitor
- O evaluate
- O plan.

MONITORING AND REVISITING LEARNING

This section will present a selection of writing, talking and listening strategies that form the basis of focused lesson orientation and review. This menu of reflective strategies (Table 6.1) can prepare students to encounter new learning, guide students during learning, and enhance or build on the learning after the lesson. It is important to consider a variety of grouping structures (individual, pair, small group, whole class) when engaging learners in these strategies. These strategies aim to:

- **prepare** students for learning. These 'jump-start' strategies activate and focus students' thinking about new learning. They assist in identifying relevant prior skills and knowledge about the topic for learning
- **revisit** learning through self-reflection, review and summary. These strategies help students to integrate, consolidate, apply and connect new learning with the nominated learning purpose. They provide useful ways of drawing out the key points after a lesson. They encourage student-directed discussion that provides useful evidence for formative assessment.


It includes some facts.
It gives reasons and your opinion.
Discussion
Some points agree and some are against.
It Names the Issue.
Points for both sides.
A Conclusion, it sums up your points.

This mind map reflects one student's current understanding of the features of discursive texts. A teacher might note the strengths in this understanding (e.g. that these texts are polemical and appeal to sometimes contradictory evidence) as well as the opportunities for further teaching (e.g. the purpose, tenor and typical locations of such texts).

Table 6.1: Interactive strategies for purposeful reflection and review

Strategy		Description
Thinking frames	KWL	Learners organise thinking into three areas: *know* (what is known about a concept, process or topic is listed in point form), *want to know* (questions arising are listed), *learned* (what is newly accomplished or learned is recorded).
	EACH	Learners write or discuss what was **ea**sy and **ch**allenging.
	Mind mapping	Learners organise their learning into a visual record of ideas and knowledge. This form of note-taking can be used for creating overviews, revising, discussions and conducting group reviews.
	PMI	**P**lus, **m**inus, interesting. A form of evaluation, reflection or self-assessment. A way to analyse what is learnt, and an avenue for exploring new ideas. Learners jot down what they believe to be the pluses, minuses and interesting aspects of a particular topic or learning experience.
Written reflection	Learning log or think book	Learners monitor their progress towards learning goals by recording summary points — for example, the easy bits and/or the hard bits from the lesson. Logs enable learners to write for themselves as an audience, to learn with and through the writing, to record what is known and what is not, and to self-evaluate performance.
	Think, write, share	Learners consider and write down their thoughts individually, then pair up to come up with one piece of writing reflecting the main points of the lesson.
	Stop and ask time	After a lesson, learners are asked to stop and write down a question about the topic of learning.
	Round robin	Learners each have a piece of paper upon which they record one response, idea or learnt concept and pass it on. The next person adds to it.
Oral reflection	Report back	As a class, with partners (study buddies) or within sharing groups, learners use key questions to guide reflection on learning: What have we done? Why did we do it? What did I learn? What do I need to do next?
	Huddle	With speed as the key, groups of learners huddle together to work through focus review questions on the learning topic.

Strategy		Description
Oral reflection	Think, pair, share	Learners think about the learning focus, then share their thoughts, ideas and knowledge with a partner.
	Three-step interview	In pairs, learners formulate a given number of questions and interview each other about the topic of the lesson, taking notes as they go. The pairs then join with another pair. Each learner introduces her/his partner and shares (paraphrases) what the partner had to say about the topic.
	Whip	In pairs or individually, learners take turns to call out key words from the lesson to build up a class list.
	Snowballing (Piggy-backing)	Learners build onto each other's ideas to extend new learning.
	EEKK	**E**ye to **e**ye & **k**nee to **k**nee. Learners sit facing each other and construct a list of main learning points from the lesson (the number is nominated by the teacher).
	Expert jigsaw	Learners acquire and share some new knowledge with a home group. The learning task or text is divided so that no one learner completes the whole task or reads the whole text; all learners are responsible for others' learning. Each team member selects one aspect (or text section) to complete, then joins those others who are 'experts' on that aspect/section. The expert groups share information about their topic. Learners then return to their home groups and teach their team mates what they have learned.
	LINK	**L**ist, **i**nquire, **n**ote and **k**now. Learners offer words/ideas associated with the focus topic. The teacher records each item, providing definitions, clarifications or examples as needed. Learners then inquire about any item through group interaction and sharing. After a nominated time, learners note what they know on a sheet of paper. The notes can be reformulated into other forms of presentation.
Brainstorming	Whip around	Used to elicit quick responses about previous learning or to revise a newly taught topic. After reflecting on the learning experience, learners are required to give rapid feedback as the teacher points around the group.

Finding Interesting Verbs To Write A Story

P – useing insted of bouring words
– make the story more interesting
– give you better pictures in your mind

M – you have to think wrealy hard
– takes more time than usual

I – It was interesting useing Jane Carroll's book because she uses exelent discribing verbs in her book
– lerning about useing fat and skinny words

This jointly constructed PMI reviews learning from a visit by author Jane Carroll.

These are but a small sample of the many interactive strategies that support focused reflection and review. They can be used in classroom lessons or after an assessment experience. They can even be used within a professional-development context: keep in mind that focused reflection strategies can go a long way towards making the one-day in-service session work.

Refocusing

As partners in the education process, teachers and students need to pay attention to developing a reflective learning community. Focused reflection is an essential lesson characteristic that enables teachers and students alike to recognise, monitor and value learning progress and growth. For many classrooms, a considerable shift in practice will be necessary to promote a classroom culture where learning is subject to regular and focused reflection.

The challenge is for system administrators to take this important aspect of quality schooling into the professional development arena. Teachers must be supported by relevant focused reflection and peer dialogue so that they can generate meaningful options for improving and renewing their practice. This kind of approach to teacher change is taken up in detail in the next chapter.

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7

Reshaping professional development for on-task teaching

Learning as professionals is an essential aspect of what we do. Teachers need to become partners in our profession and in our learning. We need to trust each other to talk about issues like classroom talk, explicit teaching and effective teaching and learning practices. And in that way we could create a system of informed professionals that can discuss and debate the issues so we can learn more about our teaching and ourselves. It is through talking and learning about our difference of opinion and interpretation that we can debate and clarify, and grow and change.

Year 4 teacher

Literacy pedagogy is a highly significant educational issue. It is certainly one that is constantly addressed at the level of professional development. Decades of professional development have addressed the effectiveness of literacy instruction.

In their efforts to bring about changes aimed at improving literacy learning for students, policy makers have traditionally aimed professional development at the macro level of teacher practice: they have addressed issues such as curriculum, theoretical approaches (e.g. co-operative learning, genre-based literacy, functional literacy, whole language, critical literacy), resources, assessment strategies, and so on. Often the focus has been on incorporating new, and better, teaching strategies.

The assumption played out here is that by changing programs, resources and strategies, long-term sustainable change in practice will necessarily follow. Many teachers attend professional development looking for ways to improve their practice and often leave with a *sample-bag* filled with a collection of ideas, resources, approaches, activities or strategies for use in the classroom. These ideas are positioned as *additive* enhancements to teaching and student learning. The more you have, the better your teaching will be. With all good intentions, teachers try out a few ideas or resources when they get back to the classroom. In truth, most 'new' strategies are discarded within a short time back in the classroom, and teachers do not benefit from enduring change. We need to ask ourselves why.

Research has shown that teachers, with good intention, *can* implement specific new strategies, and they *can* change their professional rhetoric to be more aligned with changing curriculum demands and expectations. A change in practice at the micro level, however, has not been effectively and consistently demonstrated. One particular study on the efficacy of professional development and curriculum change (Kyriakides, 1997) concluded that:

> **... teachers can change the 'official rhetoric' and incorporate new strategies and resources but demonstrate difficulties in actually changing classroom practice at the level of interaction.**

This conclusion compels us to question the effectiveness of professional development. We need to ask what constitutes *effective* professional development — what enables it to go beyond window-dressing. Do school principals, administrators, teachers and consultants have a clear understanding and knowledge about critical factors that impact on long-term teacher change?

For too long, professional development has challenged or problematised the macro features of teaching and learning — theories, curriculum, teaching strategies, resource materials — rather than the *practice itself* at the point of delivery. It is time for teachers and school communities to plan professional-development programs aimed at the micro level of practice — the level of talk. As an added layer, this professional development needs to assist teachers to put in place interactive lesson structures that support focused teaching that responds to student needs.

Quality teachers operate with a high level of theory–practice integration (Aspin, Chapman & Wilkinson, 1994). In a practical sense, they know about their teaching, why they are doing things in a particular way, and how their teaching practice influences learning; and they can articulate this. This feature of quality teaching can be described as *metateaching*, and it drives the model of professional development presented in this

chapter. The importance of metateaching — drawing in the connection between theory and practice — is a crucial aspect of effective teacher learning. Without theory, practice consists of a set of unrelated actions, leaving no basis for improvement.

The professional-development approach outlined in what follows centres on the level of talk. Teachers learn *through* talk; teachers learn *about* talk.

Firstly, the chapter centres on a guided approach to professional development that uses *collaborative focused reflection*. It leads teachers to understand the importance of the rich verbal tapestries created in the everyday classroom — in particular, their relationship to student learning. Reflection, of course, is not constructive on its own; it must be focused and followed with purposeful action that effects a change in practice.

Secondly, the chapter highlights the critical role of talk in effective professional development. Taking a socio-cultural perspective to the practice of professional development, it underlines the vital function of critical thinking and focused talk about teaching and learning, centring on the notion of teachers as learners.

Changing practice at the level of talk

When teachers examine and monitor the patterns of interaction in their own classrooms, they uncover information about what happens at the point where teaching and learning is transacted. Teachers can consider how students hear and understand lesson purposes in terms of literacy learning. Further, they can consider what the classroom talk prioritises — what students hear to be the main points, the most important things.

Learning about teaching through focused professional talk

> **What I have learnt is the importance of professional discussions. Talking about these things has helped me clarify a lot of things about my children and my teaching, and I think it has made me become a better teacher. I think that as teachers we need to have the security of knowing what is really going on in our classrooms; we then can become better learners and evaluators of our own learning and our teaching. We need to have to chance to talk about these issues in a structured way.**
>
> ***Year 4 teacher***

Collaborative focused reflection — the approach used in my study and elaborated later in this chapter — goes some way to addressing the efficacy of long-term sustainable change in professional development. It has certainly given rise to positive change in the classroom literacy practices observed in selected schools. It promotes teacher dialogue in relation to the organisation of classroom interaction. A focus on talk is the critical element.

> **I knew it [talk] was important but, really, I took it for granted. And straight away, after reading my transcripts, I knew I had to think more carefully about my talk and change what I said to the kids, and how I said it. And I realised where to change what I am saying to the kids. As a result of talking in a more explicit way, I've become aware of what I am actually saying to the children and how it relates to ... outcomes. I am much more deliberate in my delivery, and explicit about exactly what I want the children to learn. And I let them know. I am a better teacher.**
>
> ***Year 4 teacher***

Teachers must locate literacy pedagogy within its social context. Without supporting teachers with a clear picture of what effective pedagogy looks like, or sounds like, in the 'everyday' classroom lesson, teachers will be left to ask: "What does this really mean to me, in *my* classroom, for *my* teaching, for *my* group of children?"

Teachers as learners

Teacher learning is a major factor in quality teaching. Teachers need to be active learners in the teaching process, seeking to find out about their practice as well as their conscious and unconscious knowledge and beliefs about — and approaches towards the planning of — teaching (Anstey, 2002).

Active learning is promoted through active participation within a community of professional learners. In such a community, teachers engage in focused reflection, classroom analysis, critical thinking and professional dialogue that is clearly focused on the details of their teaching. The challenge for teachers is to develop efficient tools for analysing, reflecting and changing their own practice in a meaningful yet simple way.

The features and principles of productive and explicit talk — detailed in Chapter 2 and expanded upon elsewhere in this book — can be constructively applied to professional development. To engage teachers as learners, professional-development enterprises need to build a culture of learning through:

- understanding the role of talk in meaningful learning
- recognising that the teaching and learning within professional development is a socially interactive event, where the talk of sessions needs to be focused and critically monitored
- knowing and responding to the learner
- implementing focused lessons within the cyclic framework of interactive teaching: introduction, elaboration, practice and review.

These principles are embedded within the approach described in this chapter, and the following teacher account provides a compelling rationale for applying them to the professional-development arena.

> **It is important to me as a learner: when I go to a meeting or an in-service, I like to have a structure placed before me so that I know what are the expected outcomes of the session so that I can just internalise more about what is happening, where we are heading. I need to know where we're leading so that I can develop and build onto what I already know. I think that if you are on a track where you don't really know where you are going, then you spend a lot of time thinking: "Where are we going with this?" It is sometimes confusing and so, I presume, it is the same for children.**
>
> ***Year 4 teacher***

Collaborative focused reflection enables examination of literacy lessons at the micro level (classroom talk), and within a situated perspective (in the classroom context). It provides teachers with some tools to develop a fuller account of *what counts as literacy instruction* in their current classroom practice. Monitoring classroom talk within a supportive professional environment presents teachers with a tangible way to interpret what is happening in their literacy lessons, and offers up alternative accounts of effective classroom practice. It is not an approach based on hunches or on implementing strategies suggested at 'one-off' in-service sessions. Rather, it is built on the knowledge that the focal point for change is grounded in reliable and valid research data — that is, data gathered from and about *teachers' own teaching*. Gathering and using knowledge and data about teachers' own actions in classrooms is the central theoretical–practical principle that enables teachers to refine and reshape their practice by refocusing their talk.

These teachers are viewing and reviewing recorded lesson interactions in a supportive environment that provides a reflective space for analysis and targeted improvement of teaching practice.

By focusing on the talk generated in their own lessons (via audio- or video-taped lessons and transcript technology), teachers are able to observe, establish and value those aspects of their practice that are working well. Equally, they are able to recognise arenas for professional learning, growth or improvement. The taped or transcribed documentation offers an analytic basis for self-monitoring and appraisal. It offers valuable instructive information relating to: what is talked about; and how lessons are structured.

Why use tapes or transcripts?

As one of the 'players' — one of the interactive participants in the classroom — a teacher cannot realistically stand back and be an effective analyst of her/his own practice during a learning event. A second phase is needed; one that enables the practitioner to view or hear the event in a focused and reflective environment. Transcripts and/or tapes are the vehicles that provide this opportunity.

> **As a result of the intervention, I now know that a lesson really relies on more than the syllabus, or the books or the activities I planned or I like to do. It is more about how I interact with my students— how I engage students in their learning through my talk. I didn't realise the importance of it until I looked at some of those transcripts. I now continually listen to myself and ask "What did the kids hear?" and "Is that what I want them to focus on?".**
>
> *Year 4/5/6 teacher*

Further, as they look at transcript examples from other sites, teachers can transpose experiences and knowledge from their own classroom literacy-learning events. Teachers can consider how *they* would have presented *that* aspect of literacy more effectively — rethink how the talk could progress differently to make the opportunities for learning more effective. This is a powerfully valuable way of reflecting on teaching and learning on the one hand; and on the other, advancing teachers' development as critical thinkers.

Collaborative focused reflection

This approach promotes and motivates professional growth by assisting classroom teachers to reflect critically on their interactive practices in literacy lessons. Resting on the conviction that instruction can be improved by direct feedback concerning the details of interaction, the approach reveals:

- what topics teachers and students talk about
- how the literacy learning event is set up
- how the literacy learning focus is maintained
- how teachers attend to behaviour management
- how teachers organise the lesson (what follows what).

The approach links professional development directly to classroom interaction, strengthening the relationship between teaching and learning, theory and practice. As an approach to professional development, collaborative focused reflection goes beyond the scope of traditional collaborative methodologies by focusing specifically on *patterns of interaction* and *social organisation* in lessons in a critical and analytic way.

The aims of collaborative focused reflection

1. Classroom teachers work with peers to review, reform and reshape their interactive teaching practice in an informed, systematic way.
2. Teachers are assisted to examine their instructional practices and interactive routines in literacy lessons. By reflecting on taped lessons or 'reading' their own lesson transcripts, they develop and refocus their pedagogy in an effective and sustainable way within a supportive professional learning community.

3. Teachers make deliberate attempts to 'cut across' ineffective existing practices in the classroom by focusing on developing specific aspects of their literacy lesson structure.
4. Teachers value critical focused analysis and self-monitoring of their own practice as a positive dimension of successful professional learning.
5. Teachers are active learners within a process of change. They recognise that reflection must be followed by action. There is an impact on practice. They thus acquire knowledge and integrate it within their current practice.
6. Teachers build a picture of effective responsive literacy instruction by refining their knowledge about the role of talk and expanding their perceptions of *what counts* as a purposeful literacy lesson in their classroom.
7. Teachers reshape their practice through explicit instructional talk that responds to learners' needs in order to make literacy concepts and processes more accessible to all learners.
8. Teachers reconceptualise 'lessons' as interactive events by recognising when talk relates to organisation, management, conversation or instruction. They work towards maximising profitable *instructional talk*.

Previous research suggests that teacher change is often difficult, time-consuming and unsustainable. However, results from my study — demonstrations of teaching after collaborative lesson analysis, ongoing contact and direct regular feedback — show that enduring changes in instructional practice can become integrated within a relatively short time.

A crucial feature of the results was that the teachers not only demonstrated changes to their practice, they could recognise it and account for it in their talk. They could articulate the benefits of the changes in terms of instructional talk.

> **It is our job to be as effective as we possibly can be. We need to be continually mindful of what we want our children to learn and ensure our teaching methods allow children to be clear about their learning, and focus on their learning. After reading my transcripts, I realised why and how I had to change, and using the framework for presenting a lesson has helped me to do this. It is something I always do now. It has become a natural part of the way I teach and think about teaching. And it has helped me understand what explicit teaching means for the children in my class. I can never go back, now; I will always be thinking about how the talk influences the thinking and learning for the children in my room.**
>
> *Year 4/5/6 teacher*

Collaborative focused reflection: Putting it in place

1. **Recording**
   Tape (video or audio) a typical literacy lesson or sequence of lessons (i.e. an initial lesson and the two or three following).
2. **Scanning and analysis**
   Critically analyse and reflect on the recorded lessons using guide questions to steer the evaluation.
3. **Planning**
   Negotiate or design a focused, personal, professional-development plan.
4. **Practice and support**
   Enact focused and intentional change through close observation, self-monitoring of classroom talk and lesson structure, focused regular review, and direct regular dialogue and feedback with a supportive peer or professional network.
5. **Evaluation**
   Evaluate professional growth and change at the end of the planned cycle. Renegotiate future learning opportunities.

Modified versions of procedures reported by Freiberg & Freebody (1995).

How does it work?

1. Recording

Select a typical literacy lesson or lessons to record. Organise and prepare the equipment. Test the equipment thoroughly before recording a complete lesson. Be aware of outside activities such as building and maintenance, and the position of PZM microphones and video recorders (not too close to computers), as the aim is to clearly 'hear' what is being said. After setting up the equipment and before recording, write down the lesson purpose: what are you aiming to achieve in this lesson?

Transcribing (optional)

Have 2–3 taped lessons transcribed fully using a systematic use of conventions which note the literal statements as well as such features as pauses, interruptions and overlapping talk. As a word of caution, this is a time-consuming task, and it may be better to focus on *parts* of lessons (e.g. beginning sequences, endings).

2. Scanning and analysis

Scanning

Scan all of the material recorded to gain a sense of the main features of the talk. Listen to or view entire lessons for a sense of the 'whole'. Ideally, listen to / view all tapes, or read each transcription, a number of times to build an overall impression.

Analysis

Consider the lesson records with the aim of understanding what the teacher and students are actually saying. Scrutinise the sequences of talk thoroughly to elicit the essence of the talk and the consistencies (what is talked about in lesson beginnings and conclusions, whether the literacy focus is maintained). Look at the lesson in terms of what the students *show* — that is, what the students take to be going on, rather than the teacher's intention. Remember that in the process of transcript/tape analysis, we have no access to the teacher's intention: what we have is only what is evident in the interactions.

Briefly note any interactive issues, using the focused reflection questions (following) as a guide. Use the questions to generate purposeful inquiry, constructive learning, goal-setting, prioritising and problem-solving. A composite summary of main points may be written in 'nutshell statements' that capture the essence of the available evidence.

Examine the clusters of meanings to determine common or central themes in relation to:

- instructional talk — establishment and maintenance of lesson topic in relation to specific aspects of literacy
- organisational talk — lesson structure in relation to the teaching framework presented in Chapter 5; interactive routines, e.g. bidding, turn-taking, raising hands
- conversational talk — incidental topics; digressions
- management talk — behaviour management.

The questions following assist in reading transcript material or interpreting taped lessons. Consider the questions as a means to make judgements on the effectiveness of the talk in relation to each discourse category above, and in relation to literacy teaching and learning. Put yourself in the shoes of the students, and hear what the students hear to be the focus of the talk.

The questions are organised around the three crucial instructional points that were introduced in Chapter 2: lesson introductions, medial points and conclusions. They can be applied to current teaching practice formally or informally, independently or with a peer.

Focused reflection on teaching: Guide questions

Lesson beginnings: How do I begin the lesson?

What is foregrounded: what do I say the lesson is about?

What do I mainly talk about? What is made explicit?

Do my students hear and understand what the lesson is about in relation to specific literacy learning? How do they show it in their talk?

Do I make explicit links to previous relevant learning?

Medial points: How is the literacy focus maintained through elaboration and practice?

Does my talk fully engage learners in their learning, specifically in relation to literacy, throughout the lesson?

Do I allow 'everyday' topics to override the literacy-learning focus?

What literacy learning is left implicit, to be learnt incidentally?

Do I enlist texts, themes, activities and resources as agents of specific literacy learning? Or are they the primary focus?

Do students take up aspects of literacy in their talk?

Does the management of behaviour disrupt the flow of learning?

Do I allow students to build onto each other's offerings and responses?

How do I respond to student offerings? Do I allow time to expand on them?

Conclusions: How do I wrap up the lesson?

Do I direct students to the focal literacy concepts/processes or towards 'getting the task done'?

Do I allow adequate time to review, reflect on or summarise the learning?

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Are students able to articulate their learning?

Do students accomplish what I set out to teach them? How do I know?

Do I conclude lessons with connections to literacy learning?

What learning is made transferable to other situations? What learning remains trapped within a single lesson?

Do I use a range of reflective strategies to review lesson purposes and outcomes?

Do students evaluate their own progress in relation to the learning goal?

These questions also provide the basis for constructing a personal professional-development plan (the next step). Teachers can use the interactive teaching framework (page 80) alongside this question guide. The questions can also be used as a part of ongoing monitoring or daily reflection (the fourth step).

3. Planning

A key to effective professional development is recognising the need for teachers to control their own learning through a focused plan or framework of change. It is crucial that teachers view changes to their teaching practices to be directly supportive of student learning. Teachers are assisted here to design an improvement plan that will focus on interaction and on developing lesson organisational structures that support student learning and respond to student needs.

Teachers may work with supportive consultants in negotiating and planning specific areas for developing their practice. The true value of collegial support cannot be overstated. Regular contact by phone, email, video-conferencing or school visits is useful. This is admittedly a challenge to teachers working in isolation, who may find it difficult to organise dialogue with supportive peers.

At this point, an individual negotiated plan can be outlined. The plan can be as simple or as detailed as teachers feel necessary. It is recommended that the base plan be kept simple, with focal points that are not too burdensome. The purpose of working on one or two key aspects is to allow ample opportunity to monitor, self-evaluate and improve each aspect, moving at a manageable rate.

In the plan, teachers attempt to explicate, more precisely, some of the broad themes identified in Step 2, and to nominate categories for focused attention. As a matter of

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convenience and simplicity, the following categories might make a good starting point for reflection, review and development:

- structure (using the framework for focused literacy instruction, p 80)
- topic (focusing on topic maintenance throughout the lesson cycle).

It is important to note that this topic/structure dichotomy is purely a means of organising investigation. These features of classroom interaction are not separate components of the talk. Both, in fact, are embedded within the talk simultaneously. However, as a matter of convenience in guiding teachers to review their own practice, topic and structure may be drawn apart to exemplify particular interactive features that can be addressed as points for teacher development.

Two-step personal professional-development plan

1. In a professional reflection journal, write two or three main areas to work on, using information from Step 2 (scanning and analysis). Keep it simple — for example: "Keeping lesson beginnings crisp and linked explicitly to a specific aspect of literacy learning"; "Remembering to allow time for a productive lesson conclusion".
2. Set a realistic timeline for practice, peer visits, review and evaluation.

4. Practice and support

Practice is essential to growth and learning. Teachers need time to practise and to work with colleagues. It is important for teachers to 'play around with' and monitor their own talk, thinking and practice, giving attention to the nominated categories for change. A reflective journal is essential for recording incidental notes, challenges and successes.

Regular reflection and review of progress is paramount, using either a 'think about' or 'write about' approach. To structure daily reflection, teachers can use the guide questions, with or without access to tapes of their own lessons, to focus on the targeted areas for change and to maintain the integrity of the plan. However, taped lessons do provide a more objective record of the flow of lessons and the topics of talk. Whilst this may sound complex in its entirety, the key to success is developing a simple, manageable yet focused personal development plan.

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The following review schedule enables systematic structuring of 'peer debriefing', ongoing support and monitoring. Focused review with a colleague strengthens a teacher's thinking about the practice of teaching. Talking with critical friends or expert colleagues is an exhilarating way to reflect purposefully on taped or transcribed evidence and, through that reflection, to discover key issues or trends about teaching practice.

Review schedule

What did you try?

What worked well? Why?

What didn't work well? Why?

What was the lesson focus?

Was the focus maintained?

What did the students 'take up' in the lesson?

How did the students show they knew what the lesson was about?

Did students build onto each other's ideas?

Was the talk in the lesson largely: organisational? managerial? conversational? instructional?

What will be tried/worked on in the next lesson?

5. Evaluation

Worthwhile evaluation of the professional-development plan involves further taping and/or transcription, critical analysis and review focused on the nominated categories for teacher growth. After evaluation, teachers should be able to articulate what they do now as opposed to what they did before, and they should be able to identify areas of their practice that might become a focus of a future cycle of professional development.

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The power of focused reflection and review

> **Normally you don't have time to reflect. At the end of a day you think about the housekeeping things: Have I got their artwork up on the wall? Have I corrected all the maths? And then you just want to go home and relax for a while. But to make the time to reflect is vital. The intervention has been good, because it has made me think about realistic and practical ways to improve my practice that really do make a difference.**
>
> ***Year 2/3 teacher***

Purposeful reflection and review of classroom interactions is a rising issue that has become the centrepiece of much educational discussion and research. If they are to grow as professionals, teachers are compelled to question and challenge the interactive practices in their classrooms. Teachers must have opportunities to take a step back and review their practice in a focused way. But they also need to know *what to think about* and what to focus on in order to improve. This book goes some of the way towards providing that information.

> **Being able to read my transcripts and listen to my lessons on tape in a way that focused on the talk was a real challenge. It was so practical, because it was all about my teaching. Without the guide questions, though, I probably would have not gone beyond what the children were doing, their behaviour in the lesson, and maybe how well they were working. I don't think I would have thought about me, and aspects of the actual teaching, and think about what I was saying. It was a real eye-opener. Now I know how to improve my teaching that will make a difference to kids; I know what to change.**
>
> ***Year 3 teacher***

Refocusing

Teaching and learning is a complex and unique social interplay of physical and interpersonal influences. It is as individual as the location and the interactive participants (the teachers and students) themselves. Just as the social nature of classrooms has a critical impact on students' literacy learning (Turnure, 1986; van Kraayenoord & Elkins, 1990), teacher learning is influenced by social dimensions within the professional-development context. Quality professional talk about the classroom context is a key factor of successful teacher learning.

By looking practically at the level of talk, a picture of effective teaching and learning emerges, which acts as a springboard for focused educational change. Individual teachers can make changes to their practice with firm justification. They have power over their own learning. This approach moves beyond a one-size-fits-all model to respond to individual needs. It is an approach that needs to be given priority by school communities if the effectiveness of teaching and learning is to be addressed in a sustainable way. To accomplish significant change in schools, administrators must help teachers to carve out time for focused sharing and reflection about their practice without creating added stress and frustration. If such programs of professional change are supported and integrated into daily classroom life, teachers can be renewed and energised in ways that improve students' learning.

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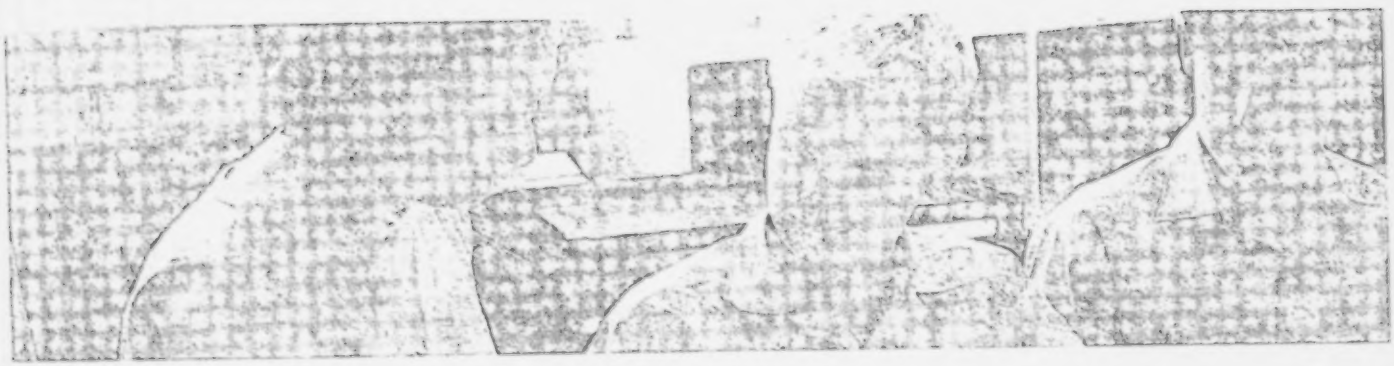
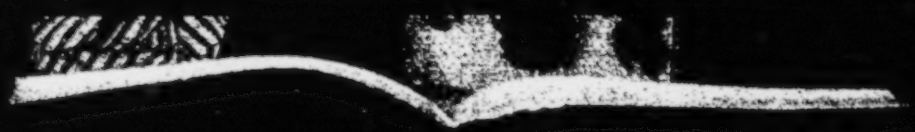


What makes teaching effective? What's a good lesson? The answers to these fundamental questions do not lie in policy and curriculum reform, in whiz-bang strategies or in imposed behaviour-management routines. Rather, they lie in classroom talk about learning — talk that sets up and maintains a shared focus that leads towards establishing clear goals and achieving lesson outcomes. Here is a book that tracks the territory where teaching counts — the moment-by-moment interactions between and among teachers and students. The author points the way to creating a culture of learning, both in the everyday classroom and among education practitioners. Along the way, she demonstrates that successful behaviour management must be embedded within learning-focused interactions.

Christine Edwards-Groves is an Education Officer for Learning and Teaching with the Catholic Schools Office, Diocese of Wagga Wagga, NSW. Much of her current work as a teacher educator is aimed at assisting teachers to monitor and adjust their own interactive practices in order to implement focused teaching and learning. Her past research has concentrated on classroom interactive practices in literacy lessons.



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